

Your name is not desert
The Evangelical League of Cuba
between 1949 and 1999

Yoe Suárez

Testimonio



ÍNDICE

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For Teresa

PREFACE

Squeezing half a century of history into a book is a task that demands certain meticulousness. After months of reviewing books, dialogues, archival papers, audio tapes, documents and photos, this research comes together in the unpredictable sea of writing. Separating endurance from transience, fable from fact, is a task that can only be fairly done with the help of those who inquired, lived and dreamed in the past what I am attempting to converge in the present. This is why I would like to acknowledge the following collaborators. Many thanks to Danay Baldor, an expert in denominational archives; Mercedes Molina, an efficient transcriber; Jessica Martínez, a patient journalist; and Amir Valle, a timely adviser. My deepest gratitude to the pastoral family, particularly Álda León and Noel Nieto who, thoughtfully and committedly, have been all along this research. I would also like to thank all the interviewees who have kindly answered all my questions and have, therefore, contributed to spread this story.

FOREWORD

Days pile up, one after another, and the years they hide, pass before us undetected. This is how history is made: so slowly, in the very depths of silence, that we need a book like this one to wake us up. I approached the LEC (Spanish acronym for Evangelical League of Cuba) in the 1990s, and it is one of the most valuable things I have discovered in my forty and so years of living because I got to know of the love of God. I started visiting the League of Bejucal—a congregation born out of the League of Marianao—during the spiritual revival that reached the denomination. A revival that was spanning the entire island. The LEC was at its most glorious, and the League of Bejucal reflected those years of economic hardships, the never-forgotten years of the Zero Option. The formerly besieged Church opened its doors to society to embrace it and to show a different path out of the crisis. It became a balm for the grievors and the poor, who found spiritual satisfaction in its embracement. We realized that happiness was not to be found in the “material things”. Yoe Suárez takes us through these pages and leads us into the inner world of the League, from its origins, without deviating too far from the events outside of it. The reading, then, raises the interest not only of the faithful, but also of anyone willing to know the history of Protestantism in Cuba. The volume covers a span of 50 years (from the 50s to the 90s), relating part of the Batista government policies, and then, the revolutionary government's, and how they shaped the conditions of the Cuban Church, almost by chisel. If—despite the political maturity of the Revolution—the Church is still a threat to some today, it is mainly due to the lack of understanding and the severe actions against religion that shaped their minds for many years.

The author creates a space within these pages for those voices that provide credibility and reinforce his story: To tell in silence.

Hence, it is a space aimed at protecting the witnesses and arousing our curiosity; perhaps, due to the popular believe that man's interest is awakened by that which should not be said or done. Few are the voices left to tell us about

the Church in the 50s or the 60s, though, many are the stories that have passed on from one generation to the next. But, with the expansion of Christianity in the 90s, there is still much to hear and collect. To tell in silence. I myself could tell a few stories as well that bear witness of the tensions between public authorities and I, when, at the turn of the 20th century and the beginning of the 2000s, I attempted to use theater to preach in the streets. There is nothing fictional in these texts; history reveals itself with the strength of testimonials. What a piece of art Yoe has created, by fragmenting interviews and intertwining them later... as in a string of beads! Voices that had the support they needed from other authors, official statements and documents written by different actors who lived during the aforementioned decades. The present book is interesting, enlightening, easy to read. Its content makes it the only one of its kind. I, for one, believe it has earned my applause, as well as many other readers'. For now, we are relieved because a part of the LEC's history has been captured in these pages. It is not in the hands of oral memory—that seeks the aid of time to blur everything—any more.

Lázaro Labrador, theater man and narrator
Havana, 2015

TO BE NAMED SALT

Much has been said over and over again about the boring and anti-literary qualities of history. I could quote some examples; books that were reprinted a thousand times—some of them to be sent to schools each September—, and others that were commissioned and then thrown stones at. They have all been tagged “books that are born without the essential freedom”: the freedom of choosing their topic, among other things. Therefore, you can understand my fear of writing a book that intends to make the history of the Evangelical League of Cuba (LEC) at its board of directors' request. The challenge of working with the excellence Alejandro Nieto Selles talks so much about, was even greater. The endless curiosity is a virtue among journalists. Perhaps, this is why—by the time I got into the university—I was concerned about the fact that too little had been written about the sixty and so years of the League. My concern turned into interest and, by 2013, I knew I was not alone. It was a little over a year to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the denomination, and it is well known that landmark anniversaries call for all types of remembrances. It was precisely the symbolic capital raised over six decades that called for a rescue. To achieve this, I had to organize dozens of testimonials, events and documentary sources. And I had to do it by following not just a chronological order, but an order that could ease the study of the subject, and could be read with pleasure. (I hope I got closer to my goals).

Who knows how many pages I leafed through looking for aesthetic referents to put together this research. The Nicaraguan writer Ernesto Cardenal published, in 1970, a book entitled *En Cuba*. It became a forgotten piece of that prolific topic that was the Revolution of 1959. In the university, I had read the testimonial volumes by the Cuban intellectual Víctor Casaus, and I was captivated by it. I found both authors, the Central American and the Cuban, very useful. Their anecdotes were colorful, their disagreements were portrayed uninhibitedly, and their stories were told from the perspective of the common citizen. Their stories

were an amalgamation of poems, news headlines, even *bolas*¹ and rumors. Their approach resulted in a broad view of the subject in question (whether a character, an event, or a time period). Casaus and Cardenal grabbed their reader's attention like few others in the non-fiction territory: their writing was blessed with a narrative style aimed at making a story rather than making a plain and simple history. Following that literary compass, and thanks to an aesthetics that had much of filmmaking, the present book resulted in a hybrid. On the one hand, the freshness of testimonials becomes the experiential ingredient of color. It laid the foundations for the reconstruction of history. On the other, there is the problematizing character of the essay which is evident in the short comments complementing or assessing -more or less unperturbedly- the contributions made by the interviewees. A great part of these capsular analysis dialogues with previous research conducted by renowned experts who have studied Protestantism in Cuba and have subsequently written and published their work here: Aurelio Alonso, Massón Sena and María del Carmen Domínguez, among others. Such contextual support was essential. This way, the reader can have a clearer understanding of the reality of the 50 years covering this research: the end of the First Republic and the subsequent four decades of the Revolution. This time, my task as a journalist has not been easy. The stories in this book are outnumbered by the ones left untold. Negotiating with the interviewees was crucial. Now and again they would tell a revealing experience and ask me not to put it in black and white. I felt like a child being seduced by candy and, then, watching someone take it away from me.

Although most testifiers' self-censorship was based on a coercive past, things have changed in present-time Cuba. Indeed, the Church asks for more understanding and spaces, there are injustices, censorship in the state medias, harassment to religious leaders, but Cuba is not the same country as 40 years ago. Either way, I have respected the identity of those who entrusted me with their stories, which I have allocated in a chapter entitled *To tell in silence*. Many people asked me why the book ends in 1999. There is more than one reason for it. From the 21st century, the missionary expansion of the Evangelical League has grown stronger, so much that new churches were founded beyond our borders. This would require a new kind of analysis. Also, the date is too recent, and wise men say that history should be left to repose before telling it. The 1990s were marked by a severe economic downturn. Amid this scene, there was a great spiritual revival in Cuba,

¹Translator's Note: Colloquial word for gossips, rumors of unconfirmed stories.

which, according to scholars and other sources, led to an unprecedented increase in the League's membership, making it one of the largest faith communities in the country. To make 1999 the end of the book is to close on a high note. That year was considered a watershed in the LEC's history. The outstanding performance of the League following the Evangelical Celebration catapulted its influence to the protestant scenery in the Island. The event of 1999 was the climax of a period of changes that started in 1982. "Cuba for Christ" was a vision that emerged during that period; it entailed a missionary crusade and increase in the members of the denomination. The Vida Plena Ministry was another essential element to understand the changes occurring in the League before and after the 1980s. Its mission was (and remains) to provide material and spiritual support to believers in the Island; although it became more relevant during the Special Period. Hundreds of people still recall Alejandro Nieto Selles getting out of his old Volkswagen to leave shoes, medicines, books and his support through his constant prayer. But Vida Plena was more than that: it became a tool for gathering denominations, and strengthening the Cuban evangelical movement. Also, it led the League—so used to remaining almost invisible—out of anonymity. The progress achieved has its roots on some major events. One of them was the revival experienced in the denomination by the mid-1970s. During this time, the church became charismatic, and this superseded traditional liturgies. This was, perhaps, the most significant event during Alejandro Nieto Campos' time as the leader of the League. He became President of the project in 1966. From that year up to this day, he and some of his descendants have been appointed to different posts among the leading staff of the denomination. Therefore, the rise of the Nieto family to the leadership of the LEC can be considered an outstanding event in the League's history.

The year 1961 represented another watershed: the board of directors was exclusively formed by national citizens for the first time. The League was again one hundred per cent Cuban. From its institutionalization between 1952 and 1954² the project was influenced—economically and liturgically—by the International Gospel League. Reverend Elmer Gedeon Anderson, denominational leader of the Californian Association, played a decisive role in establishing the League of Marianao. Before the North American leader's visit, there was already a precarious church for worship in the area of Santa Felicia (formerly

²The formalities required to legalize it began; then, it was officially registered in the Associations Registry in 1953; finally, the founding temple was opened on September 18, 1954. That's precisely the denomination's anniversary date.

known as Larrazábal). The wooden house—of which there are no graphic records today—opened its doors in 1949, and has remained opened ever since. I have dared to make a brief introduction about the events I consider the most significant in the League’s history. Some of them occurred in parallel with others which are noteworthy to the history of Protestantism and the country. The LEC has also served as an excuse to approach the circumstances that have united the Cuban Church. In the end, there’s nothing else but to thank God and hope that this book fulfills its noble function: to be useful.

Yoe Suárez
Havana, June 2014

ORIGINS

I am Jehovah, that doeth all these things. Distil, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, that it may bring forth salvation, and let it cause righteousness to spring up together (...).

Isaiah 45: 7-8 (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures)³

³ TN: This and subsequent quotes from the Bible were taken from the same Bible version.

ONE

Urbano

Sunday is always a beautiful day to Urbano. He watches people, time, and years pass by, while sitting comfortably in his stool of serenity at the church's aisle. This little man sporting a toothbrush moustache, has become iconic, indispensable. He barely speaks: just when is necessary, and he does so very succinctly. He is one of those who does not lay his hands upon anybody at the League, nor preaches, nor prophesies at worship. But he does everything and tells well with a smile, a hug, a how are you. He is a lovable man, Urbano. I can't remember when or how we stroke up a conversation. We greeted each other, introduced ourselves and an ongoing friendship started to grow—in the words of a friend of mine who is poet—with the force of the romerillo.⁴ Then, the octogenarian anecdotes came to light. The stories from Caibarién, his teenage hands shaping the wood, and his family taking great pride in the child's skills. He could learn a trade from watching his uncle work a couple of times, and be able to make a living out of it. Jesus was also skillful with the hammer, the chisel, the turps and the sandpaper. People picture him weak and faint-hearted. But Christ was a strong man, used to hard work under the Nazarene sun. More than one skeptic is astounded by Urbano every time he comes out of his workshop—covered in sawdust—with his foldable stools which, he claims, are found all over Cuba, Spain, Honduras, and even Miami. But sometimes life is harder than the carob tree. Urbano hit the road in his early years to Havana.

"What do you think? An illiterate young man in such a hard city!"—Urbano says.

"Who would have wanted to hire me?"

One day, someone stained his fingers with ink, pressed his thumb on a piece of paper—unreadable to Urbano—, and the young man put on his uniform and started to drive jeeps and trucks on behalf of President Prío Socarrás, the Constitution and the few pesos he earned and sent home at the end of every month.

⁴ TN: Common Spanish name of a plant.

Memory is unpredictable, and every now and then it evokes reminiscences of the past like a windstorm swirling dry leaves in a yard. Time goes by and we are left alone with short stories, newspaper clippings, yellowish papers, home tapes. All of it makes us want to live again, and redo the things that were, and will not be. This is precisely why it is worthwhile to attach old people's stories, the voices of the departed, the strokes in a piece of paper that tell, refute, reveal, assert, to a photo album or a book. Then, the eyes of the curious, the hands of the young can go through the past to understand, to appreciate, to be grateful to God for today. The predecessor of the Evangelical League of Cuba was created on March 20, 1949.⁵ A humble wooden home—formerly located where the denomination's offices are today—opened its doors to the League. It was the first place of worship; the church-house located on Calle D, in the area of Larrazábal, between Avenida de las Palmas and General Montalvo. Mariano's toponymy has changed so many times since then, that it may seem like we are talking about a different place. Nothing farther from the truth. We are referring to present-day 45th Street, between 82nd and 84th. Even the neighborhood changed its name to Santa Felicia. Years went by and the little wooden house was rebuilt in concrete. That first temple officially opened on April 13, 1952.

Alejandro Laredo

I am honored to be a member of that church and to have known all its pastors. I assure you: preaching and proper teaching for Cubans—for the Cuban Christians—were at the core of its leaders' agenda. Sunday School was the pillar of education since the 1950s. It had the following structure: children, young people—everyone between their teens and their thirties—, and a separate class for all adults, men and women together. Teachers not only taught the children of Christian families but also the children of the families who had not been converted. I am the result of those efforts. The brothers of the League visited the neighborhoods, asked permission from parents to take us to church and teach us the Word of God.

I lived in Curazao, a working-class neighborhood. Many of its neighbors come to church now, but at the time, I was the only one who came here. (Most of them attended catechism at the Catholic Church at the former Colegio de Belén; while others like my own family, practiced Santería). All children would hold our hands in our way to the League. We would leave my street and head towards 51st Avenue—a very busy road—; and, at that point, an adult would be accompanied by more than 10 children at a time. I was passionate for the Gospel since very little. Years went by, and I was still here. I attended service

⁵ The first church could not be named "Evangelical League of Cuba". That name came up in the 50s during Danilo Gonzalo's pastorate, and was closely linked to the collaboration of the International Gospel League.

at night. I lived about six blocks from the church, and I had to cross some dark streets to get here.

This resulted in many people treating me with respect unlike the rest of the children or youth.

I grew up in this church. I knew people from all walks of life, other youth, elders who I remember with warm nostalgia because they informed me in the Christian life.

I would attend service, and seat next to someone older than me, and learn there. My parents never attended church; that is, I didn't have a single relative to teach me God's path. Perhaps, this is why I sympathized with my elder brothers. I learned a lot from José González Sampayo,⁶ there is another José González to whom I owe a lot as well. I am referring to the elders back then. Felicia Esperón,⁷ Caridad González (who lived next to the church), Petra Moruelos; they were all very supportive. They didn't take me as their pupil, but I soaked up their spiritual life.

Urbano

He shows signs of hearing loss. He walks in short steps and gets the flu very often. If he misses service for a few days, or if he is not around, then, one can hear a buzz coming from the beehive: "What happened to Urbano?"

And he always receives visitors. Ladies who bring him lime tea, boys who bring "grandpa" vegetables and fruits. He, in return, delights us with stories from his early years. He tells us about the time when he installed wire fences in Ciénaga de Zapata with the mud up to his chest. He tells us about the time when he witnessed Batista's entrance to Camp Columbia, and the pro-coup general opening all doors with magic words: "I will make you captain, and make you, lieutenant..."—and so the "little soldiers" gave way to Saint Fulgencio who had kindly rewarded their good behavior. The sun set earlier than expected on March 10, 1952. The General arrived at Camp Columbia (which is less than a mile from the League), and once there, he sent troops to the Presidential Palace. One could smell a coup d'état. The tracks from the tanks crushed the word on the pavement. Coup, coup, coup.

Marianao is about 40 minutes from Old Havana. That's how long the military volley lasted... and a couple more hours. The constitutional government of Carlos Prío Socarrás resigned almost without objection.

⁶ As per Minute 104, he was elected board member on March 29, 1973. Laredo was proposed for the position of Legal Secretary on that same election.

⁷ As per Minute 12, she was elected board member on March 18, 1965.

Some days after the event, an editorial in the Bohemia magazine echoed the words of the common Cuban citizens who were "concerned about the triumphant military coup" and condemned "the cowardice of the officials who made it possible".⁸

That's when problems began for Urbano.

Contrary to popular believe, the remodeling of the League in 1952 was reason enough to have a rest. The following year, its leaders made a sui generis call.

Nineteen fifty-three. That's the year when a huge number of young people openly rose up against Batista's government; drop out of the university and crowded San Lázaro Avenue with torches. The year when they took up arms and confronted the dictatorship by attacking the second most important barracks in the country. The process of institutionalization of the League began amid these circumstances. It was probably in 1952, when Danilo Gonzalo, its first Pastor, presented the governor of Havana the Church Regulations proposal⁹—that was required to legalize any organization. All indicates that the League was registered in March, 1952 on the Special Registration of Associations (Registro Especial de Asociaciones); and officially recognized in an opening ceremony that lasted two hours and twenty minutes, as recorded in the following document:

A group of Christian citizens gathered at eight o'clock in the evening on April 20, 1953, on Redención neighborhood, in the area of Larrazábal, municipality of Marianao, at the house located on the street without number, between General Montalvo Street and Las Palmas Avenue, with the purpose of establishing the Main Church of the Christian denomination called the Evangelical League of Cuba. Whose Main Venue or Parent Church, led by Reverend Elmer G. Anderson, is based in Pesadovi, California, in the United States of America. We proceed to constitute the board that will preside over the opening ceremony, with brother Reverend Danilo Gonzalo as its president—elected by unanimous vote—, and brother Dr Roberto Stevenson Small as its Secretary (...)

Immediately after, they proceeded to elect the brothers who would be part of the first board of directors of the main Church of the Evangelical League of Cuba,¹⁰ the only one authorized to establish the rest of the missions or churches that, as branches of this denomination,

⁸ Enrique De la Osa: En Cuba. Segundo tiempo 1948-1952, Ciencias Sociales, 2005, Havana.

⁹ It was passed on April 16, 1953.

¹⁰ Highlighted by the author.

were to be located anywhere within the Cuban national territory (...)The Board of Directors will determine the League's destiny from the day its members are sworn in until the third Thursday of March, 1955, being constituted as follows: President Pastor, Reverend Danilo Gonzalo; Vice president, Doctor Roberto Stevenson Small; Secretary, Dr Armando Flores Salas.¹¹

The positions of Pastor-President, Vice president, and Treasurer were appointed at those meetings. The position of Secretary was considered a job to be performed by a single individual until March 16, 1967.¹² A Legal Secretary and a Secretary were elected for the first time on that occasion. The latter would be responsible for taking the minutes of the meetings.¹³

Also, six board members or advisers along with a First Member, were elected. These positions stopped existing in 1961.¹⁴

The institutionalization process ended on September 18, 1954, after the official opening of the Denomination's original church, thanks to the massive call made by Danilo, in his best crowdfunding style.

¹¹ Minute 1. Minute Book of the Evangelical League of Cuba.

¹² Minute 29.

¹³ Abner Toirac Reyes was elected Legal Secretary and Humberto Ferrer was ratified as Secretary.

¹⁴ Minute 9.

TWO

A striped notebook can become a historical document. Particularly, if the minutes of the 120 meetings of the LEC's leaders held between 1953 and 1974, are in it. The founding Minute Book is fully handwritten, most of it by the Secretary of the institution at the time.¹⁵ Despite the lack of details about the circumstances surrounding life in the church, the book is crucial to understand the origins of the denomination and to clear and clarify misconceptions. The Minute number 3, corresponding to March 17, 1955, reveals the name of a person who played a leading role in the establishment of the League in the Island: Elmer Gedeon Anderson. Many historical documents show that the president of the Gospel International League¹⁶ was closely involved with the League's process during the first years of its creation.

"He has given us his spiritual and economical support from the very beginning",¹⁷ a flier from 1952 says. Further on, the text proceeds with the following:

Three years of work and blessings have gone by, (...) and the hand of the Lord has generously manifested(...) But we longed for a more spacious church to worship the Lord!¹⁸ And He has listened to our prayers, and Rev. E. G.'s generous heartbeats for Cuba and its needs, and today, we have a more beautiful and spacious church to offer God and humanity.

The plaque relating the Reverend's devotion to the origins of the Havanan Church is there since the 50s. Alejandro Laredo, current Co-Pastor of the church, was barely a child back then. However, he remembers vividly the American's last

¹⁵ They were all related to the field of law, a tradition that has remained to this day: Danay Baldor, the current Secretary, tells me that she was elected for that position because of her Law certificate, among other things.

¹⁶ Minute Book, Secretariat Archives at the LEC, Havana, p. 4.

¹⁷ Brochure distributed on the occasion of the Dedication Service on the day the first temple was reopened on the premises where the League's offices are today. 1952.

¹⁸ The original spelling in the Spanish text was respected.

name resounding in the congregation. We always called him by his last name —Anderson—; we never knew what the first two letters stood for,”—Laredo says—He came to Cuba to do God’s work; and he founded two churches, this one and the one in La Lisa which was a branch of ours. I am not sure why we lost it, but today, that church is called ‘Cristo rey’”.¹⁹ Indeed, the origins of the League at the end of the 1940s were Cuban. Still, the Minute Book provides an important piece of information: the LEC had been influenced by an American institution—the aforementioned Gospel International League—the same way other American institutions had influenced most of the evangelical missions established in the 20th century in the country.

Danilo Fernando Gonzalo y García had a lot to do with the links between the League and the American organization. We know little about this man—only through documents and testimonials—who returned to Cuba in 1953, after finishing his studies in the USA where he was part of the Salvation Army denomination. According to Cuban researchers Daysi Fariñas and Ana M. Díaz, Danilo was also “involved with a group of business men who called themselves the International Gospel League, and had opened some projects in some places in the country and were willing to extend their work beyond American borders”.²⁰

Díaz and Fariñas claim that the Cuban²¹ arrived in Havana following instructions from the International Gospel League and with “an American whose last name was Anderson, and who held the position of secretary of the Association”.²²

Further on, the article refers to a meeting held by the two men in 1953 to found the Evangelical League of Marianao, “which was not originally Pentecostal, but its approach resembled that of Los Pinos Nuevos’ doctrine—an evangelical church born in Cuba with a marked protestant tendency tradition”.²³ The article is not explicit about whether Danilo Gonzalo was the first leader of the emerging church in 1949 or somebody else was. On the other hand, there are written

¹⁹ Interview with the author, August, 2013.

²⁰ Daisy Fariñas Gutiérrez, Ana Margarita Díaz Cerveto: «El pentecostalismo en Cuba», Protestantismo en Cuba. Recuento histórico y perspectivas desde sus orígenes hasta principios del siglo XIX, Carlos Molina (anthology), Caminos, Havana, 2013, Vol. II, p. 249.

²¹ In their article, the authors spell Danilo’s last name as “González” instead of “Gonzalo” as per the Minute Book of the LEC.

²² Daisy Fariñas Gutiérrez, Ana Margarita Díaz Cerveto: op. cit.

²³ Ibidem.

records about his confirmation as Pastor-President at the elections²⁴ of 1955²⁵ and 1957.²⁶

Gonzalo laid solid foundations for the denomination to succeed in Cuba. They formed fraternal links to other denominations (especially, to César Vicente Rodríguez,²⁷ founder of the emerging Gethsemane, in Wajay) and created ties to prop up the emerging Cuban church’s economy. In 1955, the Board of Directors was willing to extend the boundaries of the church. Thus, it granted Elmer Gedeon Anderson permission to acquire the house next to the original church on behalf of the LEC.

Gonzalo was swift to take steps for it: on March 17, 1955, right after being reelected for the first time, he called an Extraordinary Business Assembly.²⁸ Two years after that meeting the efforts were still ongoing. In October, 1957, the Board reached the following agreement: “to reauthorize Reverend Elmer Gedeon Anderson to acquire -on behalf of the Evangelical League of Cuba- the house located on 8212, 45th Avenue, between 82nd St. and 84th St. [illegible], which was extended to 43rd Avenue with a property encompassing the right half of the lot number three in the blocks number ten and eight located in the area of San Antonio country estate, a.k.a Desperanza, also known as Larrazábal (...)”.²⁹

Apparently, the property was never extended; and the LEC was left with only two houses—which are currently the League’s property.

Alejandro Laredo

Danilo—as I recall—was all love; he put his heart and soul into everything he did. He would hold children, whether they were clean or not—they were usually covered in dirt—; he used to go to the poorest neighborhoods to offer his help. He would visit parents, and if their children did not have a pair of shoes, he would buy them one or give them money. That’s the way he was.

²⁴ Elections were held at the LEC every two years. At least two thirds of the Board of Directors had to be present for the elections to take place. They were held on the night of every third Thursday of March. Those were the conditions as per the institution’s regulations to elect the top brass. The secret ballot voting method first appeared in the minute 79 of a meeting held on March 18, 1971. Whether this was already a usual practice or it became usual during this decade is unknown.

²⁵ Minute 2.

²⁶ Minute 4.

²⁷ Daisy Fariñas Gutiérrez, Ana Margarita Díaz Cerveto: op. cit., p. 250.

²⁸ Minute 4.

²⁹ Minute 5.

He loved wearing white, and he would always be covered in dirt after every visit. He was devoted to children, perhaps, because he didn't have children of his own. Apparently, his wife was unable to conceive a child due to an illness.

Danilo would hold you, and his hug hurt. I was a child, and I remember my hands bruising every time I shook hands with him. He was a big man. He always had a word of comfort for those in need. He was easy to talk to. I cannot tell you about Danilo's message because I was very little; but I can tell you about his love.

Gloria Jorge

There were some children living in extreme poverty across the League, and he would take them in his car and buy them clothes, shoes and breakfast. I believe he and his wife had children after leaving Cuba.

THREE

Oscar León

Christians have suffered hardships in this country. Almost no one talks about it, but we also suffered under Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. There are those who believe that journalists and historians are overly critical of the regime. But the truth is that those were harsh years. Young people were viewed as suspect just because of their age; and they would easily "disappear". Our church was violently repressed. Also, because some denominations such as the Assemblies of God (of which I am a member ever since I can recall) served as places where plots were hatched. We faced police repression in Las Tunas. I remember the day when the pastor headed towards Holguín—about 48 miles from Las Tunas—with a youth group. By 1957, 1958, it was very difficult to travel from one place to another. We heard of shootings all the time. It was pouring rain that day. The army had established its headquarters at the entrance of Holguín (where a huge old school—currently named Oscar Lucero—was located). They had set a permanent sentry there. They pulled drivers over to check their cars, and they only let them continue if they so considered it. We arrived in our Ford, and they made us pull over. The Pastor explained that his visit was expected in the city; he was the National Secretary of the denomination. And that's when they made phone calls. We were held for hours and suffered mistreatment and insults. It was a while before they let us go. That type of things was rife in our country. There were young people among our members, who were part of the 26th of July anti-dictatorial movement. Josué and Frank País were the most renowned of them; but there was also a young man—who was member of my church in Las Tunas—who became a martyr of the Revolution: Jesús Arguelles. A street and a school bear his name today. He was a member of the Biblical Club since he was about six years old; later on, he would join my wife in a radio show. He was a vivid boy, and that quality made him embrace the revolutionary cause. He even talked his nephew David into joining him. One night, during youth service, Jesús

seemed worried. His cousin glanced at him; they would whisper something for a few seconds and split up. I followed them on their way to the men's room. But his cousin vanished, and I could only reach Jesús. "What's the matter, brother? You look concerned." "There are things that I cannot tell you."

I wasn't happy with his answer. So, I insisted in asking him over again. I finally wore him down, and he started telling me about the outrages and atrocities in the world that had to come to an end; and we had to eradicate this, we had to end outrage... "You are reading too much rebel propaganda," I whispered to him. Jesús couldn't deny it.

"Besides,"—I said—"how are you going to end all of this? With your bear hands?"

"Of course not, Oscar. With this."

He lifted his shirt and showed me a Mic Winson. Bluish, bright, new. "Right now, we are going to execute..."

"Don't get into that, Jesús!"

"Someone has to do it, Oscar."

Eventually, he left Las Tunas. But he was careless, reckless: he was an insurgent, and every now and then, he would visit his home in the city. There was a shooting on the night of December 24 that lasted until dawn. Army soldiers cornered five young rebels. Jesús was among them. He was shot to death just a week before the Triumph of the Revolution. He would turn 16 the following day.

Urbano

One day, a bearded man was brought to the barracks; he was all beaten up. The soldier remained silent and refused to be a part of the lash feast. He was certainly as terrified as Moses was when he saw an Egyptian overseer lashing a slave, thus causing him to gasp in pain. The regime raped, tortured and fed the sharks in the bay with subversive meat. "But the *casquitos*³⁰ who climbed the Sierra"—says Urbano—"I called them bocaditos (bites), because they were almost children, with little war training, sent over by Batista...to be 'eaten up' by the rebels."

On the evening of July 25, 1958, Danilo Gonzalo calls an Extraordinary Business Assembly. What will the discussion be about?The denominational leaders search for a clue among the presents.They shrug their shoulders: they are clueless. Some of them speculate.They are living the hardest times ever. The Batista regime is losing territory.His godfathers from Washington have left him alone, and he's fighting an army of ragged

³⁰ Military men working under Batista's regime. The name comes from Spanish casco (helmet) that was part of their uniform.

man, not only in the Eastern side of the country but also in Escambray.Cities are no longer safe for the regime.Petards are blowing up more often, strikes last longer, and workmen with their blackened faces stare with the eyes of the conspirator.The beast is in its death throes, but it becomes more dangerous as it dies. It has initiated the Operation Verano offensive, and has started a hail of bullets on the Eastern part of the country. It shoots blindly into the air. It sweeps hamlets away, dries up streams, destroys entire crops in its desperation to kill.But down the mountains, roads are taken by the Rebel Army. By the second half of the year, towns and cities from East to West, each of them falls like a perfectly aligned row of dominoes: Guisa, Jiguani, Cabaiguán, Santa Clara... So, what does Gonzalo want to talk about?

He goes straight to the point, and the Secretary writes down his exact words: "he proposes a motion to make changes to the Governing Board and after discussing it, they agree to make the following changes:President Pastor Reverend Howard Lewis; Vice president Pastor Reverend Danilo Fernando Gonzalo y García and First Member Reverend Elmer Gedeon Anderson; the rest of the Board Members are confirmed".

The Minute Book does not provide a detailed record of the event. It doesn't say why Danilo resigned, or the reasons why Anderson—who attended the meeting—was removed from the Honorary Presidency (a position he had held since the beginning of the LEC).

A couple of curious things: the snap elections made Howard Lewis the only pastor in the League's history, who is not Cuban.

Also, the Board agrees "that the Secretary let Lewis know the election results by mail, and that he takes up his post".³¹ Unlike Anderson (whose attendance to the Board tells of the importance of that meeting), Lewis was not in Cuba! Therefore, this was going to be the first time that a LEC's President takes up his post from abroad. There are no records of Lewis presiding over a LEC's meeting. It seems that he never did so. Eight months later, a new minute was taken.Neither of the witnesses recall a pastor named Lewis. We still wonder whether he came to Havana or not.

Gloria Jorge

That sir, Howard Lewis, may be in the Minute Book as you say, but Danilo was the pastor. The only foreigner who had something to do with the beginnings of the LEC was Mr. Anderson, who sponsored the building of the church. When he arrived here, he saw the critical conditions of the church. He set his mind onto improving those conditions, and managed to gather donations from here and there; and that made the construction possible. Members who supported the construction earned some vouchers.

³¹ Minute 6.

How much did Lewis “control” the Cuban League’s destiny? He did not even attend the elections of 1959 corresponding to that biennium. Gonzalo, as the Vice president, had to take over duties. All three positions, Gonzalo’s, Anderson’s and Lewis’, were confirmed. Everyone who was elected took up his post, except for the Americans. Neither of them left the States. Cuba was about to enter a new era.

Gloria Jorge

Before moving to the capital city, my husband was a sergeant in the army, and no one suspected that I—his girlfriend—would collaborate with the 26th of July Movement. Not even my boyfriend himself. A cousin of mine would sell vouchers and raise money for the Rebels. I collaborated with him. I moved to Havana in 1957, and we lost touch. I got myself out of it. My husband was a military man at Columbia barracks, and he was given an apartment at 8215 on 45th Street, between 82nd and 84th. That is, across from the Evangelical League of Cuba. I started going to church the following year. (I still had some of the vouchers I used to sell). My first child was born in 1959.

Pablo Mejías

I was born in April, at the Military Hospital in Marianao.

But I took my first steps at the League. I heard that it was a small place and that there was an apartment—I do recall this vividly—across the street for Children’s Sunday School. Grandma Pachy³²—who made my entire layette—rented a place there for a while. That apartment also served as a storage place for curtains, props, and everything that was used at stages and Christmas plays.

Alejandro Laredo

There were two halls for Sunday School, and we also used the porch. Sometimes the noise in the street would distract people from the lessons. Therefore, they swapped places with the neighbors who lived on the second apartment on the side corridor.

Gloria Jorge

A missionary woman called Mary Sarduy taught at Sunday School during Danilo’s time at the League. She used to stay in the room at the end of the pastoral house. Danilo and his wife—whose name was also Mary—were very good-natured people. Everyone said that his blood parents were no longer alive, and that he had been raised by people of color.

He visited my building very often. He was a stout man. A wonderful person.

³² He refers to Norberto de Quesada Jr., the current president of Los Pinos Nuevos.

He owned a *pisicorre*-type car,³³ where he used to pick everyone up—elders, disables, and some brothers who lived afar—on worship days. There were people from the municipalities of La Lisa, current Playa. There was Shela, one of the founders of the church, who lived in Playa. Many Americans would attend service as well. Mainly, because Danilo had links to them. Everyone knows that the American Reverend E.G. Anderson supported this church and its first pastor. So, they came and led services here.

Pablo Mejías

As I recall from my childhood and teenage years, this was a traditional church. Congregational singing had a prominent role in liturgies. These pews are the original ones; they date back to the 50s. You can see some marks on the back of each of them (in a different color). Those are slots for hymnals. There was a guide there for singing.

There was a grand piano on the platform, that was played by an old man—named Luis—; a virtuoso pianist. He was succeeded as a pianist by a lady nicknamed Cuca; and later on, by Estercita Nieto Selles, when she was old enough to play it.

I also recall Arnoldo, a fat man who used to seat on the first row and play the accordion at worship. He tried to teach me something, but I am tone-deaf for music.

Gloria Jorge

There was a big patio at the end of the former pastoral house, where the lady’s and men’s rooms are located today. We used to make entertainment activities such as theatrical ones. The church was one big family. Everyone knew each other, everyone visited each other. We would all head to Danilo’s house after service. They would play music, we would talk for hours and then return to our places late at night.

Batista flees the country!

Oscar León

The Caravan of Victory stopped in Las Tunas where Fidel set a sentry post formed by men from the Rebel Army. My pastor was willing to lead a Thanksgiving Service at a park. He went to see Ramonín, who was in charge of the post, and handed him a formal authorization request letter. He was instantly authorized. And the young people—myself included—started to prepare for the service;

³³ TN: Literally “step-and-run”, Cuban name for a station wagon type car.

we built the dais. As you know, Catholic Church used to be at the center of religious faith. So, when the priest saw all the preparations, he started shouting at us with his Castilian accent: “What do you think you are you doing! Are you insane? You cannot do that here!” He called the police to force us to leave the place. The officers saw our authorization letter. The priest was not happy about it and threw a fit. But he could only go as far as to toll the bell to disrupt the service. However, the police officer kept his word and no actions were taken to prevent the service from taking place.

Pablo Mejías

The Rebel Army got to Camp Columbia base and my dad continued to work with them for about a year—as a Military Instructor—until his retirement. Although he ceased his functions as a military man, we kept our apartment across the LEC.

Alejandro Laredo

People from all walks of life attended this church. All kinds of people. It was not an issue. Most of them were elderly, though. A Christian father would bring his children. Children like me only attended Sunday School; but, overall, little attention was paid to children. I remember there was a brother—who’s still alive—who visited this church. His name was José Salinas; he’s currently over 90 years. He used to be in the Army. I don’t remember whether he was corporal or private. He would come to church dressed in a military uniform, with his gun on his belt. There was no political connection between the first leaders of the League and the Batista government. Although, we were open to anyone interested in knowing God. So, as I said, Salinas was a church member, a soldier under Batista’s command, a Christian and he never had problems with that. He was never arrested, nor he was accused of anything.

Urbano

He was always a driver, and no one ever dared to accuse him of tortures or assassinations. “Thank God I kept my job,” says Urbano. But one day -there is always one day- he left the army. “Why?” I asked.

Urbano’s gentle voice barely rises above a whisper: “The rebel knew where I came from, and he started shouting from the jeep—so everyone could hear—that one day his column besieged a casquitos convoy.” When the sun rose, Urbano walked down to a nearby stream into which he sunk his canteen; the rebel—who was hidden in the weeds—aimed at him with his Springfield. Urbano felt his shooter’s breath and abundant beard grazing his neck:

“And I killed him, as I would kill a deer...”

Right after, he parked his car, signed some papers and resigned. He then became a driver...a transporter. He chose to risk his life on the port: terrorism was there, bombs falling on La Coubre, and pieces of metal all over the place crushing men. It didn’t matter. This was better than the Columbia jeeps. The load didn’t reveal a dark past. The load was silent.

The Revolution came up with the Literacy Campaign in 1959. But it wasn’t the first campaign of its kind. A group of protestants had promoted a literacy campaign in the 1940s with the support of the Committee on World Literacy and Christian Literature of New York.³⁴ The then young Raúl Fernández Ceballos participated actively in that adventure. Years went by, and he later became a prestigious Reverend of the Presbyterian church. He stood next to Fidel during his speech to the nation on January 8, 1959. And he was one of the leaders of the crusade that made possible to declare Cuba free of illiteracy. People hardly remembers those moments. Someone close to me, confessed seeing the hand of God in many revolutionary actions. “All Cubans will be able to read the Bible thanks to the Literacy Campaign,”—he admitted. Everyone judges History according to the glasses through which (s)he looks at it. There are those who assure that the relations between the protestants and the bearded government deteriorated from the very beginning. I beg to differ. However, I should refrain from denying any of the testimonials of opinions that are different from my own. Either way, the joy experienced by the Cuban people after the overthrow of Batista was beyond all ideologies; a logical reaction after years of an institutionalized terror. That feeling of relief was wide spread among believers.

³⁴ Juana Berges: “El movimiento Ecuuménico y su trayectoria en Cuba”, Protestantismo en Cuba. Recuento histórico y perspectivas desde sus orígenes hasta principios del siglo XIX, Carlos Molina (anthology), Caminos, Havana, 2013, Vol. II, p. 180.

Beloved ones, do not be surprised about the fiery trials that you are experiencing, as though something strangewere happening to you (...)

1 Peter 4:12

Soviet Deputy Premier visits Havana Fourteen sugar mills of the Republic are occupied

242 250 TONS OF SUGAR CANE BURNED BYPIRATE AIRPLANES
 REGLA AND COJIMAR UNDER
 BOMB ATTACK
 THEY WERE DROPPED NEAR A CHILDREN'S INSTITUTION
 IT CAME FROM THE NORTH AND FLED THAT WAY
 Government seized 40 companies from embezzlers
 Is there a Christian
 landholder? *by samuel feijoo*

These lines are dedicated to our country's landowners (the ex-proprietors and those who will become one of them as the Agrarian Reform Laws spread, province after province). They have been written to clear their minds, now that some of them pretend to hide behind the words of Christ. Let us recall some Christian texts about the rich and the wealth. Here's the first and crucial one:

Keep your eyes open and guard against every sort of greed, because even when a person has an abundance, his life does not result from the things he possesses. (Luke 12:15)

Brief comment: a man's life does not result from the wealth he accumulates: but, from true love towards his neighbor. A man who owns an estate of 95 475 acres for instance, and has *guajiros* rushed off their feet working for his splendor and magnificence, is not Christian; he is definitely not a Christian. He's fooling himself or he's being fooled by others if he thinks he is. But he is not.

(Revolución Journal, February, 1960)

Alejandro Laredo

Some places were taken from the church at the Triumph of the Revolution, such as orphanages, old people's homes, and nursery schools. Many denominations raised their voice in protest because they did not agree with those measures. The League was not affected by it because it did not have other properties but this church, the one in La Lisa, and an apartment on the ground floor, right here on 45th Street.

Oscar León

When Batista was overthrown, the project of the Revolution was not even close to Communism. The initial political discourse was profoundly influenced by José Martí's ideas and those related to anti-imperialism. Imperialism in all its forms had subjugated Cuba. It was condemned by Martí, Bolívar and everyone who could do so at the time. Thousands of Cubans sacrificed their lives in their fight against Batista, and they did it, knowing that the country was indirectly governed by the United States. The guerrillas descended the mountains in January, 1959 wearing virgin Mary medals and Saint Barbara necklaces around their necks. Even more, father Sardiñas—who was in the Rebel Army—became famous among the guerrillas for his work as a chaplain, and he was promoted to Commander. I am sure that there were also Protestants in the Rebel Army. Everyone united because they all had a common enemy: the dictatorship. Right after the Triumph of the Revolution, the United States declared its discontent with the new direction of the country. Naturally, they could not be happy about it. No more privileges for them. Hence, they said: "We are not going to buy more sugar from them". Cuba's main source of income was sugarcane harvest, so they thought that their actions would undermine the evolving process. At the same time, the revolutionary government seized the lands and homes of wealthy proprietors. The Urban and Agrarian Reforms were among the most important projects. A big part of the millions and millions of pesos seized, belonged to American companies.

A war of laws and comunicués started. The Eisenhower government was shutting all doors to Cuba, and the Cuba answer was to seize the Electric Company or ESSO. Let's see who is stronger. In this context, the revolutionary government had everything to lose. In order to survive, they had to form an alliance with someone else. The Soviets lent us their helping hand; they gave us almost everything. They supported the Revolution—economically and militarily.

We had to bear in mind that the Cold War³⁵ was at its height. In view of the unbridgeable gap between Cuba and the USA, Fidel had to side with the Soviet Union. Of course, we are talking about a highly materialist and dogmatic Soviet Union that nurtured the Revolution. For instance, dialectical materialism became a regular subject in schools. The Declaration of Havana was followed by an invasion planned by the Americans, and immediately afterwards, the October Crisis that put the world on the brink of a nuclear war, began. All these events happened in a very short period of time producing a great deal of tension.

Behind the gum curtains

BLOCKADE, ISOLATION, TERRORISM AND AGGRESSION

The first major Soviet oil tanker arrives in Havana

It carries 256.000 barrels of crude oil and has a displacement of 35, 00 tons.
Beautiful pool.

(Revolución Journal, January 17, 1961)

Alejandro Laredo

There was a time when political issues were not discussed with children and teenagers at home. My dad—Socorro Laredo Castillo—passed away recently, at 90 and so years old. Shortly before he died, I found out that he had been a revolutionary clandestine combatant.

Representatives from the *Asociación de Combatientes* (The Combatants Association) went to his funeral and draped a flag on his casket. Shortly before he passed away, I talked to him and asked him why it had taken him so long to tell me about his past. He merely replied: "It's something that you didn't have to know". The Revolution triumphed and he never spoke about it.

That sort of things, that were very usual before 1959, discouraged my interest in politics. But the first steps taken by the Revolution got many young people to work. My older sister, for instance, taught people to read and write here in Havana.

Many events took place at that time. The Bay of Pigs invasion affected all Cubans. It affected us in the sense that our country had been attacked. But that

³⁵The Cold War was a conflict that took place between 1945 (at the end of World War II) and the 90s, between the international communism, led by the Soviet Union, and the capitalist system, led by the United States. Both their war machines and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust made both sides avoid an armed conflict. Therefore, the so called Third World became the arena for an ideo-political conflict in which Soviets and Americans lent their helping hand—according to their interests—to certain governments or armed groups. They both intended to win allies and geo-strategic positions for themselves.

didn't stop the work of the church. In the League's case, they were able to continue their worship service because the government never interfered in those matters. It's true that the invasion did not have further consequences in Havana. Children attended school and people went on with their daily routine. Now, things were different during the October Crisis; the citizens in Havana got more involved in the process. There were cannons and antiaircraft missiles above every building. My mom would say: "do not leave home until things calm down out there". I had no idea whether there was church service or not, but I believe that there was.

With terrorism and economic blockade permeating the lives of Cuban citizens, the island was shaping into a nation that was increasingly different from the nation it was before 1959. That vision of "besieged plaza" brought about a somewhat distorted reality that has survived to this day. A reality in which there is a fear of what's different, what's alien to us; a reality in which there is a certainty that whatever criticism or opinion that differs from the mainstream's is synonymous with counterrevolution. In that setting, a Cuban Christian begins to shape up as a "natural dissident"; he refuses to take up arms in a war context; Sundays are "the Day of the Lord" and not the day for Voluntary Work; a Cuban Christian avoids—at least publicly—political trials. Christians form a community with an alternative leadership to the government, and a project in which they have believed for the past two thousand years. The context surrounding a Christian man oppresses his conscience and earthly life. He, then, finds himself with two alternatives: he is either shunned by society, or he alienates himself. The situation is aggravated when the changes brought about by new and tense circumstances do not help the Church. Like any other revolution, the Cuban Revolution removed the foundations of the preceding society. The result was as radical as it was traumatic. In view of the uncertainty of the moment, human nature tends to reassure everything within its reach. A bank account offers people certain financial security. This is, presumably, why, on May 10, 1960, the LEC's board of directors called an Extraordinary Business Assembly. The minute number 8—corresponding to that day—recorded that appointed members of the board should open "a bank account that would allow them to better control their social funds". They all agreed to authorize the Treasurer to open, handle, clear or close all sorts of bank accounts. He was also legally authorized to write checks and send invoices in order to draw money or make deposits into the LEC's bank account. The minute also implied that Danilo Gonzalo should act as a kind of de facto President of the Assembly, even though he had stated that he was still the Vice president. This is an important piece of information to answer some questions. It is possible that, given the growing tensions

between the American and Cuban governments, the visit from the American Howard Lewis to the island, was more and more unlikely.

American Citizens Banned From Visiting Cuba

WASHINGTON, January 17 (PL) The new regulations are aimed at banning Americans citizens and citizens holding a permanent residence in the United States from traveling to Cuba, the State Department said in a statement. The new measures taken in view of "the impossibility of protecting American citizens who visit Cuba after the US severance of Diplomatic Relations with the island", were announced to the press by the State Department Spokesperson, Lincoln White. *(Revolución Journal, January 17, 1961)*

Oscar León

The severance of ties with the United States was traumatic for Cuban congregations. For instance, the books that we received came from the Vida publishing house—the largest publishing house in the Christian world—based in Miami. We used to receive monthly shipments of books. When we stopped receiving them, we started writing our own treatises, handbooks for teaching, and struggled to print things underground. My children helped me for over fifteen years. We were allowed to write things in a piece of paper, but we were not allowed to make a hundred copies of it. It was banned. There was a different problem every day. We spent fifteen years in those conditions...

The United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba by the second anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution. In the words of Dr Caridad Massón Sena, the event "raised concern and uncertainty among religious people and, notably, evangelical circles, (...) because their headquarters were based in the US; they continued to receiving economic support from the US, and -with the exception of some denominations whose leaders were mostly Cubans- most of their leaders were American pastors and missionaries, whose theological and ideological influence was of great significance".³⁶ The year 1961 was a watershed for Cuban reality. It was contradictory and complex. It was the year when the Revolution was declared socialist; the Literacy Campaign started; the militiamen and a group of exiled Cubans clashed at Bay of Pigs. It was also the year when an unprecedented, shocking event happened: "With the purpose of universalizing free education—Massón Sena adds—the revolutionary government nationalized all educational institutions (...). Every private teaching institution, including hundreds of

³⁶ Caridad Massón Sena: La Revolución Cubana en la vida de pastores y creyentes evangélicos, Ediciones Memoria, Havana, 2006, p. 14.

Catholic and Evangelical ones, became the state's property, and their staff were called to keep their positions at public schools. At the economical level, this measure affected the church due to the loss of one of its main sources of income, and, at the spiritual level, it meant the absence of a channel to catechize".³⁷ This law did not affect the League. The church did not own orphanages, or schools, or old people's homes. But you could cut the air with a knife. Seventy percent of pastors, including those who came from abroad, left the country between 1959 and 1969. In view of those circumstances, the election that had put Howard Lewis into power at the LEC, did not seem like the right move to do. His appointment was allegedly made, in the first place, due to the International Gospel League's interest in exert a more direct control over the Cuban church amid the uncertain and turbulent political changes of the country at the time. Since 1902, Americans (and foreigners in general) were guarantors of any enterprise. Let's face it: no one messes with the gringos. However, this presumed guarantee could turn into a problem, or lead to unnecessary suspicion. This was, perhaps, the reasoning behind the decision of appointing Reverend Danilo Fernando Gonzalo as President Pastor. This was the result of the elections of March 16, 1961.³⁸ The rest of the Board was then formed by: Vice president, Pastor Jesús Abreu González; Secretary, Dr Carlos Isaac Miró y González; Treasurer, Dr Leticia Sosa. The following people were appointed Members of the Board: Arsenio Aguiar y Albrecht; José Luis Salinas; Zoila Domínguez; Encarnación Fernández Lugo; Rafael Orelly; and Armando Bravo y Guerra. I have listed these ten names for a reason. They reveal a crucial data of the epoch: for the first time, no foreign leaders are part of the Board. It was the first time that the Board of Directors was exclusively formed by Cuban members

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Minute 9.

A PARENTHESIS: (SALINAS)

The same way a leader is always remembered either because he is illustrious or because he is feared, people retain the image of the picturesque. There was once a Board Member who was blind—Rafael O'Relly. He would preach using his Braille Bible. His name can be vaguely found in some archives, but he is mostly remembered by his generation, who are also witnesses of the past. Rareness attracts as much as grandeur. But, what's in the middle? What is halfway between the iconic and the majestic? There he is, José Luis Salinas. Not only he was a founder of the LEC, but he is a part of the LEC's history. Nonetheless, he remains unknown for the denomination's leaders. It's been years since he became an active member of the League in the early 50's, and a Board Member in 1961—at the elections that resulted in the first Board formed exclusively by Cubans. He is the only surviving member of that moment. It's been years since he left the Board in 1968. Salinas was confirmed as Board Member between 1961 and 1967. He said that his job on the Board was similar to that of an adviser's. Delving into his memory, he states that Mr. Anderson brought Danilo with him to Cuba after undergoing studies in the United States, and he introduced him to the church as its new pastor. Salinas asserts that the organization to which the mythical American belonged, influenced deeply the direction of the League of Marianao. "Not only he supported the church financially,"—the nonagenarian explains—"but also dictated the spiritual guidelines by which the church had to be governed. Once in the island, Danilo was the one entitled to appoint church leaders. "He would send them to the Nazarene Seminary or Cabaña, and they would graduate there as pastors. They were taught how to address a congregation, and introduced to the church after graduation". Danilo had close ties with Salinas. Not only at a professional level, but at a personal one...they were true brothers. Doctor Leticia Sosa—Danilo's wife—would play the piano and lead the children's choir, as it was usual in every traditional evangelical congregation. However, everything changed after the Revolution. The pastor stopped travelling

to the US. According to Salinas, the church was left adrift after the severance of diplomatic relations between Havana and Washington. Then, there was the LEC's little abyss: Danilo leaves, the flock gets confused and goes astray. A friend leaves a friend. "He did not care for Cuba anymore,"—he says. "We never heard of him again". "Never" and "anymore" are big words. Hyperbole may be the spear of reproach. "As for the congregation, the word of the Lord was fulfilled: 'As we look intently at the Chief Agent and Perfecter of our faith, Jesus'." He moistens his voice with words from the Bible; and sprays them on his wounds.

HURRICANE (CONTEXT)

*Even in the early 1960s, mass media will continue talking about Christians without too much prejudice. For instance, in 1961, Calvert Casey³⁹ will be able to write freely, his article "Christ and the people" for the *Revolución Journal* (the official journal of the 26th of July Movement), in which he will provide a detailed description—from his perspective—of all similarities between the beginnings of Christianity and the Cuban Revolution, without some dogmatist or guru of truth accusing him of "ideological diversionism". Anyone could write freely that Fidel had made his victorious entry into Havana at the same age as Jesus was when he ascended to His Father. I mean, the big institutional schism between the evangelical church and the State, is not triggered by the triumph of the Revolution. The conditions leading to it, developed with time and the light on the horizon started to fade in 1963.*

Oscar León

Many people hid in temples to carry out acts of sabotage and fight against the Revolution. Although, there were no evangelical temples in Las Tunas involved in these acts, and only few denominations in other places were part of them. Most of the subversive activities were plotted from within Catholic circles. There was a Spanish ambassador—his surname was Logendio and lived here between 1962 and 1963—who went by the name of Marqués de Vellisca, who used his diplomatic immunity to conspire against the Revolution. On top of it, the Catholics fostered and encourage sedition. Fidel condemned this publicly on Sunday, March 13, 1963, at one of his appearances that was broadcast live across the country.

That was one of the few times that the stairs of the University of Havana had been so crowded. They commemorated the sixth anniversary of the attack on the Presidential Palace by an armed group of young students from the University of Havana. Fidel approached the rostrum and tilted his head before the row of microphones.⁴⁰

³⁹ An important Cuban writer in the 1960s who ended up exiled to Rome.

⁴⁰ TN: The Spanish extract of the speech was taken from the Department of Stenographic Versions of the Revolutionary Government. Available at: www.cuba.cugobiernodiscursos1963espf130363e.html (Accessed: May 23, 2014). The translation of the Spanish excerpt was taken from the website of the Latin American Network Information Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Available at: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1963/19630313.html> (Accessed: September, 2018)

"Today I am going to speak of others who, invoking God, want to carry out a counterrevolution." The crowd showed their approval by clapping.

"This is related to what we spoke about, the most difficult battle of all, and that is the battle against the past and how that past tries to return by all means possible, and how the reactionaries use all possible methods." Fidel spoke at length and violently. First, he addressed the conflicts between the state and some leaders of the Catholic church. He waved his arms and his military uniforms shook with every word he said. He called them agitators and instigators of terrorism in the Island. "The Revolution respects the religious sentiments of any citizen. This is not the same as respect for the counterrevolutionary activities of any reactionary cloaked with religiousness." Aroused by his words, the crowd shook the Havanan evening with a standing ovation. "What did the imperialists do? Were they satisfied? No! They changed tactics and even changed their church. This is what imperialism did. It changed tactics when it saw itself crushed in the cities by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. The encirclement against them became so tight that they had to move out of the cities, and went to the countryside where the dispersal of the population makes vigilance more difficult than in the city." Fidel was interrupted again by the applause of the crowd. The applause was a sign of individual and collective support, effusiveness...

"For some time now, we have observed an unusual activity in our country —activity never shown by these sects that are directed straight from the United States since they are not directed from Rome. These sects are directed from the United States and they are used as agents of the Central Intelligence Agency, of the State Department and the Yankee policy. Then news and reports began to arrive, especially in the areas where the counterrevolution was actively working, about the presence of elements of these sects." Fidel stated that they struggled with subtlety: they go preach to a zone where the CIA has tried to create terrorist bands, where people are murdered and where they must defend themselves against the bands and the assassins. "This is where the agents of imperialism appear saying (...): 'Do not use weapons, do not defend yourself, do not be a militiaman'. Or else, where it is necessary to pick cotton or coffee, or to collect sugar, or to do some special work when the masses are mobilized some Sunday or Saturday, they say: 'Do not work on the seventh day'. Using religion as a pretext, they begin to preach against voluntary work." His words added fuel to the crowd. A violent murmur ran through the pavement and rose slowly to the rostrum. "They preach that allegiance should not be pledged to the flag and they say to the parents: 'Do not send your children to school on Friday so that they will not have to pledge allegiance to the flag'. Can our country, a country which has had to fight so much for its independence and for its flag,

a country which has left so many heroes along the path, a country which has given the lives of so many young people, of so many workers, of so many peasants, and of so many fine men and women for its destiny, tolerate anyone preaching such irreverence against the country, this irreverence against the flag?" Fidel seemed to hear something and remained silent. The murmur became clearer and clearer. One voice, then another, and another...the crowd unhesitatingly cried for death: "up against the wall!, up against the wall!, up against the wall!, up against the wall!, up against the wall!..."

Oscar León

I watched the speech on TV at home. Fidel spoke for hours as usual. During his speech, he said that people would conspire at the Assemblies of God... I almost fell on my back!

"Our people know these pseudo-religious people well, particularly in the rural areas. As one comrade says, one of these groups is known to our peasants and our militiamen by the name of 'batiblanco'⁴¹ —batiblanco with 'b'—. They have appeared in many of these places. There are three main sects, the principal instruments of imperialism, today. They are: Jehovah's Witnesses; the Evangelical Band of Gideon (boos), and the Church of the Pentecost." An increasing boo rose as he mentioned each denomination. "It is a peculiar thing—and it is a proof of the revolution's tolerance, an extraordinary proof of the revolution's tolerance—that this latter group has a school, called the Biblical Institute of the Pentecost, where it prepares its cadres in the province of Las Villas near the town of Santo Domingo. It is directed by a North American. A Yankee is the director of this school! How far does the tolerance of the revolution go? How far does it go?"

Oscar León

The Biblical Institute in Manacas, Las Villas, was closed down due to alleged accusations against its director for being a CIA accomplice.⁴² The director, whose name was Floyd, was deported to the United States in 1963. In the end, it was proved that he had nothing to do with plots against the Revolution. His innocence was confirmed years later, when he was authorized to reenter the country on two occasions. His last visit to the island was in 2004.

Floyd was not the only one who had to flee the island, but all foreigners and their spouses who worked in the Seminary had to do it as well. They were 23.

⁴¹ TN: White-clothed people of Evangelical protestant groups.

⁴² "There was a serious incident at the Assemblies of God; they had a Biblical Institute that was ran by an American who was accused of being a CIA agent and, consequently, expelled from Cuba. Several party leaders at the time, declared themselves to be against the activities of these churches—classified as sects—and stated that they wanted to fight their actions energetically and in the ideological battlefield". Caridad Massón: op. cit., p. 15.

My pastor was among them. He was Cuban but his wife was American. They were given 72 hours to leave the country. This created chaos where most church leaders were foreign citizens. The church was left leaderless. In addition, and to make things worse, we didn't have schools to educate our pastors anymore. *The five years following 1963 could be referred to as a kind of dark age in the history of Cuban Christianity—if Ambrosio Fornet will excuse me. The beginning of such times was marked by a speech from Fidel, followed by the opening of the regrettably celebrated UMAP,⁴³ in 1965, and ended in 1968 with its closure.*

Suspicion grew during that time and large groups of Protestants grew apart from the government. Tolerance was the only way to avoid a clash in such critical circumstances. A country with the right to defend itself turned into a coercive regime with a strong sociopolitical apartheid position towards its religious population.

This rupture was evident in the statements of members of the Cuban government. Blas Roca, who was among the leaders of the PURSC,⁴⁴ published something entitled “La lucha ideológica contra las sectas religiosas” (Ideological fight against religious sects) in 1963. The article went beyond personal issues and revealed the official position of the government. The text, that was published in the Cuba Socialista magazine, accused some Protestant groups of supporting insurgents in the Escambray mountains, and condemned their anticommunist proselytizing actions. Roca's statement made clear—from the very title of the article—that the clash between the Church and the State was

⁴³ Spanish acronym for Military Units to Aid Production: Mandatory Military Service was one of the answers from a besieged Cuba in 1963. The first call to register for the UMAPs was on November 19, 1965. The second one, was going to be in June, 1966. The purpose of these units was to recruit mostly teenagers and young people who were part of social groups with improper behavior/ideological diversionism. Homosexuals, lumpen people, people who frowned upon the revolutionary process, individuals whose appearance resembled the hippie movement, and people whose convictions kept them from taking arms (mainly Catholics and Protestants) were part of that group. Military convicts were also in the list of people who were sent to those units. Some sources claim that 25 thousand names filled the UMAPs barrack huts during the two and some years they remained active.

They were highly criticized not only because of the labor regime of recruits, but also because of the way in which they were pulled out of their homes and taken to the camps. They were denounced by the people, religious institutions such as the Presbyterian church, the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba and foreign citizens who shook their apparent impunity. Mistreatments, and physical and psychological tortures to soldiers had sad consequences, such as suicides, and self-mutilations (due to which soldiers hoped to be taken to hospitals out of the units or to escape from the daily working tasks that were carried out in the early mornings).

This subject lacks a comprehensive study in Cuba, that can describe and assess that experience from different perspectives.

⁴⁴ Spanish for United Party of the Cuban Socialist Revolution (Partido Unido de la Revolución Socialista de Cuba). It preceded the Cuban Communist Party that was founded in 1965.

ideological.⁴⁵ For Roca, the enemy was the content of some sermons, beliefs, or Protestant concepts. They were openly trying a whole ideological system, and not isolated or specific groups. “This is not about casting out a reactionary minister: there is a stance out there, damaging the Revolution, our homeland, our people, every worker and every one of us, that needs to be crushed,”⁴⁶ he wrote in his best call-to-war style. In order to legitimate his call to “war” even more, the communist leader quotes the President of the Republic, Osvaldo Dorticós: “in our war against the sects, we need to unmask and defeat the ‘false, Confucian, and malicious sermons’.”

Now, who was going to determine which the sermons met those “requirements”?

Oscar León

The problem was that whenever they mentioned the word “church”, they referred to all churches regardless of their type.

For instance, the UMAP were created for religious people. Our church did not put up any resistance to avoid the units. Protestants are fearful of the law. And this is mirrored in their daily behavior. We would pray, as commanded by the Bible, for God to fulfill his purpose for us. Also, we were not prepared to deal with any of that. Cubans were marked by the Batista dictatorship; they felt a sort of exhaustion, a sort of reluctance to rebel against the establishment. History has taught us that those who rose up against the government had to flee to Sierra Maestra, and whether you believe it or not, that type of collective terror experience scars people for life. Besides, the triumph of the Revolution brought about things that we didn't actually expect.

The Military Units to Aid Production were created at the request of some military officials in Camagüey. Commander Fidel Castro suggested the name of the units.

They are one of the three types of army that exist today to defend the country from enemy attacks and to boost the country's economy.

(...) the SMO (Spanish for Mandatory Military Service) has two brands: the military brand and the productive one. The UMAPs are part of the latter.

The SMO prepares people to defend the country using arms; the UMAPs prepare them to defend the country by boosting production, particularly, the agrarian production.

(...) servicemen to the UMAPs are recruited through the SMO, they wear SMO uniform and are disciplined according to SMO rules.

⁴⁵ “The Revolution has defended and continues to defend itself from these activities both in the field of ideology and in the field of the fight against criminals and terrorists”. Blas Roca: op. cit., p. 152.

⁴⁶ Blas Roca: op. cit., p. 158.

Now, not everyone within recruitment age has the same social background. Most of them have the sublime virtues of the youth, but some of them have soaked up capitalist influences and they behave as “misplaced elements”. This behavior is not normal; we, humans, are social beings par excellence.

What shall we do about it? We shall guide them into the activity that made them human in the first place: labor. And that’s the purpose of the UMAPs:

they are forced into creative work, productive work; and those hands that lay idle are fulfilling two purposes: they are becoming useful to society, and they are—as a magical “boomerang”—educating, instructing: humanizing.

So far, the Military Units to Aid Production are based in Camagüey; however, they will continue to expand to other provinces. They will open units in other places as needed.

(...) So, these young servicemen head to the future. Some of them are actual lumpen. Others, have a somewhat distorted education due to their religious beliefs that forbids them to salute the flag and defend it from the enemy.

Many of the latter, even though they keep practicing their religion (they don’t work on Saturdays, for instance, so they choose to work on Sundays when everyone else is resting) have expressed their willingness to prepare themselves to defend their country.

(...) And that’s precisely the aim [of the UMAPs], to see into the future and create an awareness of the new man, the communist man.

*(El Mundo, April 14, 1966,
UMAP: forging a citizen that serves society)*

SIX

Gloria Jorge

By the time of the triumph of the Revolution, no one could have imagined that the church was going to be persecuted by the government; therefore, many Christians supported the cause to the best of their efforts. It’s true that Danilo stopped pastoring here and left to the USA in search of a better life; but he also left because the system harassed him. Not only Danilo, but everyone. “Christian” was like a... swearword. You could not say that you went to church; if you did so you were either fired from work or you could not find any work at all. When Danilo made his decision of leaving the island, he told his family solely. His decision affected us, the members of the congregation, deeply. He did not have difficulties leaving the country thanks to his American contacts. He appointed Castañeda to replace him as a pastor.

Reverend Eugenio Castañeda y Prado became the new LEC’s pastor one week after Fidel’s schismatic speech in 1963 and remained the LEC’s leader until 1965. There are no pictures of him in the League’s archives. We learned of his birth date (1923) because it is written in the Minutes created during his years as a pastor.⁴⁷

Samuel Ruiz, Doctor Humberto Ferrer y Rodríguez, and Gerrmania Hayrado⁴⁸ de Castañeda⁴⁹ became the new Vice president, Legal Secretary and Treasurer respectively. The six board members were confirmed in their positions. The same board members will be almost entirely reelected⁵⁰ in 1965, and will pastor until 1966.

Gloria Jorge

Back then, the church owned an apartment located on 45th Street. Sunday School used to be held there; sometimes the place would welcome people from afar and they would live there for a while. People from Los Pinos Nuevos stayed

⁴⁷ As per Minute 25 of a meeting held on November 27, 1966.

⁴⁸ The original spelling of the minute has been respected.

⁴⁹ The pastor’s wife.

⁵⁰ At the elections of 1965, Vice president Samuel Ruiz was replaced by Reverend Jesús Abreu González; and Felicia Esperón replaced Board Member Armando Bravo.

there for various reasons. Castañeda never let it for rent; he just offered the place as a refuge to overnight at.

He wasn't the kind of person who paid visits to members of his congregation—at least not to us. He was a serious, reserved man, but also a fine person.

When my daughter was little, she fell while jumping rope and broke a tooth. Castañeda was the one who took us both to the hospital.

He was a helpful guy. He used to say: "Whatever you need, I'm here for you."

Alejandro Laredo

His nature was different from Danilo's. It's not that he wasn't a caring man, it's just that he used to teach at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary; therefore, he was a man of teaching, of character, of responsibility and discipline.

We learned from him a lot, even though he led the congregation for such a short time. There were still few members during his time as a leader. (Generally, evangelical churches had a high number of members). At that time, one could be found sitting alone on a pew. There were no divisions at Sunday morning services like the ones we have today. There was the leader of the youth and a small group of barely ten people. Women did not have their own department, neither did men.

But we didn't put too much effort into door-to-door preaching. It was a shame, because we realize now that it is an effective way of reaching more people. We simply preached the Gospel. We visited people whenever they were and preached to them. We would always visit people. We would visit sick people in hospital; we would visit the needed, we would talk to their families; we would visit the sufferers, even if they were not believers. The church always kept its missionary character. The Evangelical League in Cuba is unique in the sense that it did not emerge "abroad". It was born in Cuba. And this peculiar feature of not having connections abroad made us economically limited when compared to other denominations; but on the spiritual level, we are all God's children.

No one spoke of tithes or offerings at the time. No one had to pay a dime or give any kind of offering to become a Christian. People were not obliged to do so, not even today; and most importantly, we want people's offerings to come from their hearts first. We depended on the contributions from people's offerings and tithes for years. I'm talking of contributions from merely 30 to 40 people.

Gloria Jorge

Service was held on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Wednesdays were devoted to Bible Study, and the newly baptized people attended

religious education classes that day. Courses for those who were willing to be baptized did not exist. There were lessons on some things about the Bible at 8:00 pm. From 7:30 pm on, they usually played songs of praise which could be heard in the entire block. All these happened during Danilo's and Castañeda's time. It all ended with Nieto. Neighbors began to complain about the excessive noise. So, he was advised that the music was too loud. Then, he would play it quietly, just for the members of the church which were very few at the time.

Castañeda started to ask for accountability from board members on a monthly basis. (This accountability was going to continue in subsequent pastorates). The minutes written during this period provide more details about the development of the church when compared to the ones written in previous years. For instance, they provide a comprehensive description of the beginning of board meetings: Prayers were followed by hymns and a reading from the Bible. The latter was usually made by the Pastor. "Next, members of the boards read their reports. The secretary announced that no one had left or joined the congregation; the rest of the members offered a general report on the work of the church. No agreement was reached."⁵¹ The minutes will start to be written in this sort of capsular style resembling briefing notes.

These meetings were compulsorily held every month; therefore, we can have an idea of the LEC's developments thanks to the information collected in the minutes. They offer interesting data.

For instance, several reports from the Treasury describe that "the church's expenses were fully covered, but not the pastor's".⁵² The League went through economic hardships in several occasions; and this did not weaken the strength of its main leaders.

Thanks to this piece of information we can conclude that Castañeda's full time employment at the church implied that the church had to cover his expenses. But this was very usual from the very beginning of the denomination and remains like that up to this day. Another revealing data: the number of young members of the League fluctuated over the years. Several reports on former and new members serve as evidence. Most people who leave the church and/or become new members are between their twenties and 35 years. On the other hand, believers were commonly from Marianao. However, the 70s witnessed many members coming from Santos Suárez, El Vedado, etc. Around 70 people

⁵¹ Ibidem

⁵² As per Minute 15 of a meeting held on March 31, 1966.

left the church between February, 1966⁵³ and January, 1974.⁵⁴ The reasons are many: some died, and some others did not abide by the regulations of the institution. But, in all honesty, most of the people abandoning the church actually left either because they were fleeing the country (there were several members of the board among them),⁵⁵ or because they claimed not being able to attend service. Or was it actually because of the social pressures besetting all believers?

⁵³ Minute 14.

⁵⁴ Minute 116.

⁵⁵ Such as, Arsenio Aguiar Albrecht (Minute 28 of a meeting held on February 26, 1967) and Encarnación Fernández Lugo (Minute 42 of a meeting held on March 28, 1968); both of them were board members at the time.

SEVEN

Oscar León

I don't think there was any law forbidding Christians to attend higher education. But since you were a child there was a sort of "label" displaying whether you were a believer or not. And you carried around that label your whole life, even during your days as a workman. That label could stop you from becoming a leader of any kind; let alone a union leader. As a matter of fact, that was one of the questions I was asked when enrolling for mandatory military service: "Could you tell me a bit about yourself?". I was a Christian long before 1959, and the guy who was taking notes on my answers knew me from Adam. I was a pretty well-known photographer. I used to work at 15-year birthday and wedding parties. "Do you visit any church?"—he asked as if trying to soften the tension. He was trying to put me as a visitor. "Is that what's written there?... Because I am actually an active member of a Church." He, then, stood up, stopped typewriting and took a red pencil. He drew what seemed to me a circle on the questionnaire.

Alejandro Laredo

I started my studies at la *CUJAE*⁵⁶ in 1966. Most youths were willing to study at the beginning of the Revolution. Mainly, because there were no entrance tests. Around one thousand students enrolled in the first year—which had a syllabus that was common to all majors—; it was a very tough year. We were given 19 days at the end of the course to prepare for and do six final exams! Following that period, we spent 45 days doing agricultural work. A little over six hundred students—out of the 1200 that enrolled in the university in 1966—failed their exams. I was willing to study art at San Alejandro's, but I reconsidered my choice otherwise I would starve due to the lack of paintbrushes, wax crayons, and canvases—or so I told myself. I also considered enrolling for Chemical Engineering, but I was asthmatic. I had worked in construction before, and I enjoyed it. So, I finally decided to study something similar to architecture: Civil Engineering. Even

⁵⁶ Spanish for Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echevarría (José Antonio Echevarría University City): higher education institution founded in 1964 and home to several engineering courses.

though I lived here in Marianao, I decided to board at the university: they provided us with lunch, dinner and two sets of clothing per year. Dormitories were in good conditions, and I got along with all students—militants and non-militants—in the Faculty pretty well, because I focused on nurturing fraternal relationships, not political ones. I have never had anything against neither militants of the Communist Party or military men. In the end, God intends to save their souls as well. I rarely felt shunned by students or Faculty staff. I was disciplined. I fulfilled my duties at the dorms, and that didn't go unnoticed by my comrade classmates. I was proposed to become a member of the Communist Youth more than once. The fact that I was a Christian wasn't such a problem. Perhaps, because I never carried a Bible under my arm, or preached around my Faculty, or formed a group of Christians (not that there were lots of Christians around to form a group with). I never meant to become a pastor. I had the choice of applying to the Seminary thirty years ago, but I decided to become an engineer. In my opinion, there were many ups and downs in the life of the pastors I got to know. I enjoyed Christian life, but never felt the need to be elected a church leader to be able to preach, to walk, to become a righteous man. That's what we were taught as children. I learned to serve here, at the Evangelical League of Cuba. I remained here until I moved to Cienfuegos with my wife -that was three years after my graduation-. Once in Cienfuegos, I continued working on God's things together with the Nazarenes. I settled for that: just to serve. Today, many want to become leaders first and then serve. Also, I didn't wish to become a wealthy man. My mother raised me away from unhealthy ambitions. I enjoyed my life: I was an educated man, able to work and make my contribution to this country and support my family. Although, I must say that there was a certain tension at college around Christians. One could perceive it: many students avoided me just "not to get into trouble". Sometimes, they let me out of school activities...they wouldn't even inform me of certain activities. It was ok with me; I was focused on my studies.

On April 17, 1966, the top brass of the church was called for an urgent meeting. Eugenio Castañeda gave an unexpected announcement: he, his wife and Jesús Abreu González were handing in their "irrevocable resignations due to personal reasons".⁵⁷ Board Members looked at each other in shock. This was the first time a pastor resigned from a duty he had sworn to faithfully fulfill during the time set. Did the Board try to enquire about the "personal reasons" that led them

⁵⁷ Minute 16.

to make such a decision? There was no other choice but to accept their resignation. The League had no leader. The Board was aware of the dangers of a church without order. These were troubled times in Cuba. Was that the reason why the members of the board were reluctant to take the steps described in their Statutes? Replacing those who resigned was not an easy task. They asked Reverend Castañeda to be the provisional leader of the church until a new leadership was elected. They just wanted to buy some time. A time needed to put order, to think. The members of the board saw a silver lining when Castañeda accepted their proposal. Humberto Ferrer, Legal Secretary at the time, noted down swiftly: "José Luis Salinas suggests that elections be held next Sunday, April 24 at 9:30 pm. His proposal is unanimously adopted".⁵⁸ Before the end of the meeting, the board welcomed three new members: Alejandro Nieto Campos, Evelio Martínez García and Ester Selles. Three members were gone, three members were welcomed.

Alejandro Laredo

Castañeda was either the teacher of or had a close link to Nieto Campos during his years in the Seminary. Most of Castañeda's students were great pastors at Los Pinos Nuevos church and other denominations. He left the country the same way Danilo did. It's not that they had gotten into trouble, they simply didn't care for politics. I don't think they were threatened or anything like that; I believe they were running away from Communism—as many would say. Actually, people in Cuba didn't know communism as such. There was the *Partido Socialista Popular*⁵⁹ before the Revolution, but no one talked about it. Let alone the people that had links to the Americans. They used to say: "They are going to turn Cuba into a Communist country! Watch out, this is what they'll do!" People preferred to leave the country thinking that the worst could happen.

Pablo Mejías

When Eugenio Castañeda left, many people stopped visiting the League. He opened a church in Miami. A family that was close to my father followed him because the man of the house had also served as a soldier during Batista's time. They lived next to the church.

So, by the time Nieto took his position as church leader, there were few families in the neighborhood. I remember there was an old lady who stayed and looked after the house. Her name was Sara Innis. There was also Grisel Cordové

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ The PSP (Spanish for Popular Socialist Party) was very socialist and but not so popular. It had close ties with the government of the Republic during Fulgencio Batista's first administration due to its collusion with Batista during the elections.

(who continues to being an evangelical on the exile); and Caridad, a woman who lives next door to the church and who visits the church with her family. Those are the few names I remember.

Gloria Jorge

I don't know why he left the country. I am not sure if it was because his family was in the USA; but he always thought of leaving and that's why he called Nieto. And he kept in touch with him even after he left. They communicate with each other.

I'm sure of it, because, my husband was in need of a medicine once, a medicine that could only be bought in the US. Nieto talked to Castañeda and he sent it.

EIGHT

Ester Selles

Alejandro and I met the day when he went to visit a sister at the church. I was doing some embroidery in the sewing machine. The owner of the house approached me after he left, and said: "Ester, did you notice the way that man looked at you?" "The way he looked at me? No, I didn't."

Shortly after that day, Alejandro told me:

"Let's pray to be joined if that's God's will."

So, we did. We thought it was the Lord's will, so we married on February 2, 1957, in Holguín. We started to serve at a Salvation Army church. They owned the orphanage next door as well. There was a Swedish woman who lived across the church. She left the country when the government seized the orphanage after 1959. Then, the leader of the denomination left my husband and I in charge of the place. Those were hard times. One day, there was a girl, who lived in the neighborhood, smoking a cigarette. She saw someone coming nearby—someone who wasn't supposed to see her smoking—and she hid the thing under some clothes. A few seconds later her clothes were on fire, and she started to scream: "This is *batiblanco's* fault! They want to set everything on fire!" By *batiblanco's*, she meant us. They left threatening notes under the door. The officials insisted so hard in us leaving the orphanage, that one day I told them: "I will pack the child's cradle, and some rocking chairs and we'll move to the first floor."

"No, no. You don't have to do that."

"But we don't have anywhere else to live at. This is what we can do." Alejandro travelled to Havana. He talked to the denomination's leaders, he got into negotiations and he was finally able to get the rest of the building back—they were thinking of turning it into an institution for the elderly. Once more, we were across the place, until Castañeda asked us to move to Havana. We were in charge of a home for the elderly—which belonged to the Salvation Army—until 1966.

To tell in silence

One of the oldest members of the LEC told me that Eugenio Castañeda swap his apartment on 45th Street for the one at the end of the hall, and left the *CDRs*⁶⁰ to “look after it”. His black pisicorre met the same fate.

So, by the time of Nieto’s arrival to the church, the car was gone. On the other hand, Alejandro Laredo asserts that the Ford 60 was lost because the pastor was obliged to sign papers every time he had to replace the license plate. “Therefore, when he left the country,”—Laredo says—“he decided that the car had to be in the government’s hands.

Ester Selles

“I can’t leave you anything, we’re out of funds; but I’m leaving in peace if you are the church leader.” Those were Castañeda’s words shortly before departing for the United States. He had been my pastor. I converted under his leadership. I started teaching at Sunday School and participating in neighborhood worships (currently known as prayer cells). I did all those things while I was in Puerto Padre, Las Tunas.

Alejandro and I arrived here when our children were very little. Alejandrito was two, and Estercita was just a few months old. Few brothers and sisters came to this church; but the ones who did, were faithful and brave, as those tough times required them to be. (We celebrated new conversions). They contributed to the tithe with very little. Sunday offerings was merely of 2.50 pesos. We had adjusted to the difficult times. My husband was very poor. He joined to the sugarcane harvest and did any type of job to earn his living before converting to Christianity. He ended his four-year studies at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary in 1955. We both studied and worked in Havana with our brothers from the Salvation Army for a short time; but Alejandro was eager to go out and preach, so he left his job at the office. He heard a call from God. Then, Castañeda and his wife—with whom we had excellent relations—called us to pastor at the Evangelical League.

No one knows for sure why Castañeda wanted to leave. According to Pablo

⁶⁰ Spanish for Committees for the Defense of the Revolution: an association of neighborhood committees created in the early 60s. They have had a leading role in the mobilization and organization of the people. They participate in border and community surveillance, and work together with the Ministry of the Interior and other state institutions; they are part of investigation and verification processes related to the appointment of people to positions that require high confidentiality from individuals, as well as those related to travels abroad, etc.

Mejías, he died around 2010. He had seen him shortly before giving a lecture at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary.

His unique face, his corpulent body...Pablo was absolutely certain who that guy was. He approached him after his lecture. “Do you come to Cuba very often?”—he asked.

“Yes, I do. I come almost every year to visit my family.”

He was tempted to ask him if he remembered the League, or why he never visited the League again.

“Castañeda told me that he pastored for a church in Miami”—Pablo adds—“and I didn’t want to ask him about that subject; I feared that he might think I was suspicious of him.”

They said goodbye and never saw each other again.

More than 40 years before that encounter, on April 24, 1966, the Board had met to elect the President, Vice president and Treasurer of the League: Alejandro Nieto Campos, Evelio Martínez García and Ester Selles respectively. Castañeda said goodbye. Arsenio Aguiar, a Board Member, thanked “the outgoing leaders for the years they have devoted to the church”.⁶¹ In his inauguration speech, Nieto Campos vowed to do his best as the new leader of the League. Then, he prayed goodbye to his predecessor.

Here’s something curious: Evelio Martínez, Nieto Campos and his wife were promoted to church leaders a week after becoming members of the LEC... This, of course, was the result of Castañeda’s plan which he had devised long before his resignation.

These were the beginnings of one of the longest pastorates in the LEC’s history (ending in 1982), a pastorate that welcomed the Nieto family name into the denomination’s tradition. Fifty years later, his descendants remain leaders of the institution; they will promote some of the most radical changes in the LEC’s history. Nieto Campos called for his first Board meeting four days after being elected president. Without delay, they carried out the corresponding supervision the last Thursday of every month. According to the first seven reports, there is a certain stability at the League: “the denomination is going well”,⁶² “there is nothing new to report”.⁶³ In November, 1966, they all “agreed to make the following congregants’ resignation as members of the denomination official, due

⁶¹ Minute 17.

⁶² As per Minute 20 of a meeting held on June 30, 1966.

⁶³ As per Minute 21 of a meeting held on July 28, 1966.

to their departure from the country: Rev. Eugenio Castañeda Prado, 43 years old, resident at #8212, 45th Av., Evangelical Minister, and his wife, Agustina G. Ayrado Moya de Castañeda, 38 years old, resident at the previously mentioned address and a housewife.”⁶⁴

It was, perhaps, the delayed migratory paperwork between Cuba and the United States what kept the former League’s president in the island longer than expected. (Even Josué Abreu González remained in the country until February, 1967)

They also agreed that Nieto Campos and his wife moved to the pastoral house—formerly inhabited by Castañeda—at the end of November.

NINE

Alejandro Nieto Campos was a reserved man, but he would always take a moment to listen to people, to encourage them, to advise them. There are people who think that the mere fact of becoming a Christian makes all your problems go away; that becoming a Christian is like finding a treasure. According to the Bible, “the one who does go out, though weeping, carrying his bag of seed.” It means that you should be willing to give your all, mainly when you’re a leader; it means that you don’t get to spend much time with your wife, your children and your work. I never heard him neither complain nor ask about his salary. The point is that when he got here, he wasn’t thinking about his earnings; that’s why he stayed with us and that’s why this church is what it is today. Or predecessors suffered, but they remained strong on their path. Honestly, I believe that he survived thanks to the profound faith he had during his pastorate, because the church’s funds were of merely 17 pesos by the time he arrived. The majority of the issues he faced as president were of economic nature. The League had few members; therefore, offerings and tithes were limited. There were always people who would offer him their food and money; members of the congregation are used to doing that kind of good deed: sharing the few things they possess, especially with God’s servants.

Oscar León

Alejandrino had a very difficult childhood. Sometimes his father would take him to visit their brothers, and his lunch would be a pizza and a guarapo.⁶⁵ Then, they would go on. He didn’t eat properly. The first time I invited him for lunch at my house in Las Tunas, we made chilindrón .

He barely tasted it. His jaws could barely chew the meat, and he said: “I’d prefer some eggs”.

⁶⁴ As per Minute 25 of a meeting held on November 27, 1966.

⁶⁵ TN: Drink made from sugarcane.

Pablo Mejías

Ale was a year younger than me; he was the same age as my sister. We all attended the same school. There were four children—Estercita, Alejandrino, my sister Gloria, and I—living in my neighborhood; we never became members of the Pioneer's Organization. I never knew why not, but that's the way it was. Most church members were white elders. There were few children. We had difficulties coping with other kids in the neighborhood. They would bully us just for being Christians. Every now and then we got into a fight with some gang on the corner.

Alejandro Laredo

I knew the terrible situation of the family first-hand. I didn't have a place to live when I got married; so, Campos lent me a room on the first floor at the end of the pastoral house, overlooking the street. Vida Plena Ministry is based there today.

I have good memories from the time I spent there. That's where my wife took her first pregnancy picture. The fact that I lived there with the family, made me get to know their private matters: their generosity towards the needed, their physical and spiritual work focused on increasing the membership of the congregation. Ester Selles was and still is a woman of prayer. Regarding Alejandro, he never raised his voice above hers. Not a single argument was heard while I was living there. He would call Alejandrino Pipo, and even when discussing something serious with him, there was kindness in his voice. Sometimes his attitude was really infuriating; if someone treated us unfairly, he didn't even argue against him or her. It was a zero-violence policy. "If they're right, there's no point in fighting them,"—he would say—"if they're wrong, then, their problem is with God". It's true that during Nieto the elder's time, the church was never so crowded as it is today. You could walk from one corner of the church to another on Sundays and not bump into someone. You didn't have to worry about losing your seat at worship. But when Danilo González left the country, many members stopped going to church. He was succeeded by Eugenio Castañeda, who also left the country, and that's when membership truly decreased. In addition, the image of Christians suffered at that time, and many people were afraid of the consequences of going to church: dismissals, acts of condemnation, coercion in the communities resulting from the propaganda fostered by government officials, and so on and so forth. Danilo, Eugenio and Nieto carried out a missionary

service consisting of visiting people in the area around the church. I joined the youth group who accompanied them. They would always visit people, no matter the difficulties, considering how far a small church like this one could go. Also, the schedules were different: Thursdays were devoted to biblical studies, Sunday School in the morning and worship at night. There was a specific time slot for prayers on Tuesday. There was always time for prayer at the League, thanks to which—in my opinion—this congregation has overcome obstacles and has expanded. Not only the number of members has increased but also the number of truly converted people.

Ester Selles

The church has changed a lot since we arrived. Castañeda had already set up a Lady's Department. Then, we created a department for gentlemen and another one for youth. Alejandro Laredo was among the first members of the Youth's Department. Children's activities were held at the apartment on 45th Street. They were not divided into age groups and shared the same room. I founded a children's choir. We would visit and shared with other churches. We would rehearse and present plays on Mother's Days, Christmas and other events. Alejandrino and Estercita would join us and help in whatever they could. They grew up and became the church's musicians. Ester played the piano and Ale, the accordion. He was a self-taught person and could play several instruments very well. That group of children would also preach. Alejandrino preached about Paul's life once...and his sermon was long. My son's sermons were long and he would always talk longer than usual!... He had talked beautifully, but I was sitting on the front row and I was gesturing for him to stop talking...

Traditionally, the League has always paid special attention to children. Witnesses have confirmed that this was usual since the 50s. Alejandro Laredo himself was one of those children who went to church thanks to the "schools" that were created. However, the first reports about the church's work with children was found in the Minute Book from 1967: "It is unanimously agreed that Mrs. Aydee Ramos, superintendent at the Sunday School Department, temporarily moves into the house of this department in order to organize the educational material and restructure the syllabus for the academic year corresponding to 1967".⁶⁶ The book also revealed that there was a "one-week break"⁶⁷ devoted

⁶⁶ As per Minute 27 of a meeting held on January 30, 1967.

⁶⁷ As per Minute 60 of a meeting held on August 28, 1969, "(...) a week's vacation was taken from the 18th to the 24th of this month".

to possible activities for children. Women's work within the denomination has always been relevant for the development of the church in Cuba. Women's have always been in the leadership of the League since the League's foundation. They have even been in the majority in more than one pastorate. For the first time, all members of the Election Board that met on March 16, 1967⁶⁸ were women: Zoila Domínguez, Encarnación Fernández Lugo, Felicia Esperón, Lilia Reyes, Sara Innis and Graciela Reyes Montenegro.⁶⁹

(Women's empowering reached such a point in the Evangelical League of Cuba, that 2010 witnessed the election of the first female President-Pastor: Álda León. She became the first woman to lead an entire and relevant denomination in Cuba). Still, when referring to a significant structural change during Nieto Campos' pastorate, it is worth mentioning their missionary work. On January 30, 1968, after praying for the new year's resolutions, Alejandro Laredo makes an announcement that will initiate the LEC's expansion: "to turn Barcelona 106 church (located on Centro Habana) into an Evangelical League's Mission, and appoint someone to lead it and support it".⁷⁰ This was a historical announcement. Despite the fact that the LEC was absolutely entitled to found ministries, it had never founded a mission before. They started to work on that approach over a decade later. The announcement was "well received"⁷¹ by all members of the Board of Directors; the minutes corresponding to subsequent meetings record the situation of Barcelona 106 church. The new church was renamed Emmanuel⁷² (and it seemed like both churches shared the same funds to cover both their expenses since the beginning).⁷³ The reports reveal the church's involvement on missions. By the end of 1970,⁷⁴ the pastor highlights the fact that 28 people were converted by the churches of Marianao and Barcelona. That was probably the highest number of conversions that appeared in the founding Minute Book—which is actually a small number when compared to today's records. The newly converted people's ages and addresses are heterogeneous which may indicate the existence of an extensive evangelical campaign. Written

⁶⁸ Alejandro Nieto Campos, Ester Selles and Evelio Martínez were confirmed in their positions at the elections.

⁶⁹ Minute 29.

⁷⁰ Minute 40.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² The name appears for the first time in Minute 65 of a meeting held on January 31, 1970.

⁷³ As per Minute 77 of a meeting held on January 30, 1971. The report states that one thousand pesos were added to the funds.

⁷⁴ As per Minute 76 of a meeting held on December 31, 1970.

records of another meeting held months later show that "(...) the denomination is doing well, particularly the Emmanuel of Barcelona 106 church".⁷⁵ This type of hazy description is to be found in subsequent reports. In October, 1971, Nieto Campos received a letter from the Misión Evangélica del Interior⁷⁶ (MEI).

It was a formal request to the LEC for the LEC to give or donate the premises where Barcelona 106 was located to the MEI. They were requesting to move their congregation in Santo Suárez "which was inactive due to the lack of a temple",⁷⁷ to the site of Barcelona 106 church. The LEC attended their request, although the name of Emmanuel would continue to appear in the minutes for several months. And this is how the Evangelical League began its expansion, although taking in an "adoptive child". The first agreement taken in 1968 had a missionary nature; this quality is going to remain a part of the denomination up to this day.

Pablo Mejías

I always heard that Barcelona 106 church was ours, but it also belonged to a leader who had preached at the League before: el Chino Lee.⁷⁸ They knew each other from the times when Nieto Campos was a pastor at more than twenty churches of the Reformed Church in Matanzas. He later joined the Salvation Army. Apparently, the relations between the League and the Reformed Church cooled off after we lost Barcelona 106. Nieto was very reserved and he would always measure his words; he didn't talk much. When asked about the subject he would reply: "that pastor is a good friend of mine". Sometime later, when the church wasn't ours anymore, I heard that Lee had merged it with the Reformed Church. I used to attend events at the Reformed and Los Pinos Nuevos Churches. They would take us to both churches probably because of the good relations between the leaders of both churches. I heard Nieto sr. say that both churches suggested that we joined them. But he refused to do so. I also heard of a temple that belonged to us before 1959, and we lost because we did not present the required papers.

⁷⁵ As per Minute 80 of a meeting held on March 30, 1971.

⁷⁶ The Evangelical Mission of the Interior (English for Misión Evangélica del Interior) is currently known as the Christian Reformed Church in Cuba. Its headquarters are located in the city of Jagüey Grande.

⁷⁷ As per Minute 87 of a meeting held on October 31, 1971.

⁷⁸ His name was David.

Alejandro Laredo

Liturgy was different in the 50s and the 60s. It used to be more conservative, nearly Presbyterian. It mirrored its time. All churches did. The Pentecostal church was the noisiest one; but it didn't have drums, nor trumpets, nor anything like that. Maybe a piano, and some people playing the tambourine. ¿Maracas, drums, and bongoes? Not even the Pentecostals had! Hymns needed to be arranged for piano. There was a huge piano, a grand piano, at the edge of the platform. There wasn't a veneered pulpit back then. Alejandrino had the pulpit laminated with the acoustic of the temple in mind. The painting with the cross was there, but the wall was plain.

There was a series of armchairs featuring wooden backs in the current leader's seating area. There were fifteen of them. There was also a pastor's chair with a similar style, and two side chairs under the cross. That's where the pastor, his wife and another leader sat.

There were kneelers on both ends of the pulpit, near the edge of the platform. Today's pews are the original ones. They are part of our history. They would be at the end of the temple, and there were no chairs on the aisle. We didn't have a wooden screen back then. We had to place one at the main entrance because of the constant aggressions: people would throw stones, and scream at us. There were no doormen; so, young people aged 15 and 18 would pair up and take shifts to guard the entrance.

Ester Selles

Only Cubans were invited in, no foreigners were allowed. Whenever we held a Convention or an event, we asked for authorization beforehand and we usually got it; but we were not allowed to do anything outside church premises. Although we had some constraints, we began our door-to-door preaching, with the utmost tact. Christians were not allowed to preach neither at universities nor at other specific institutions. They could be sentenced to up to six months in jail for preaching in public spaces. We

would pray, fast, ask for God's guidance, visit our brothers and sisters to encourage them, because our work will be devoted to God today, tomorrow and always.

Urbano

It was 1969, and the little church of Marianao was more crowded than usual. The pews were unusually full of members of the congregation as well as people who had never stepped their foot inside a church; they were all listening to a guest Evangelist preaching the salvation message. You could barely hear the oak furniture creaking when people —uncomfortably—moved. Urbano and Sea didn't notice how long they had been holding hands. He was sitting at the back of the temple, trying to hide from the rest of the congregation. He was a little embarrassed by the situation. The hymnal, people crying... most of them women. Also, he had heard so many things about religious people that he had resisted the urge to visit the League more than once. The League was in his neighborhood; just a few blocks away from where he lived... but no! What would people say about him! A truck driver, a carpenter, a tough guy visiting a mad people's place? There he was... He doesn't even remember what made him enter the church that day. But this wasn't the worst. His wife grabbed his hand and said: *Let's go!*

Minutes later, he was saying a prayer which he forgot as soon as he returned to his seat. I converted during a service led by pastor Seymore. I believe that it was part of a campaign he carried out—Urbano adds. Service ended and, before leaving the church, Urbano felt more than one welcoming hand on his shoulder: Congratulations, brother.

Ester Selles

By the time my husband and I pastored, the League was carrying out an evangelical campaign for which we had invited a pastor surnamed Seymore. He was preaching to a lady in Marianao; then, her husband walked in and accused him of proselytism (this is how they would call it). He went to prison on proselytism-related charges (the sentence was six months). His diabetes got worse shortly after going to jail; he had a crisis and didn't have his medication. He died because of it.

Pastor Pablo Mejías asserts that I am the answer to his prayer. He says that ever since Nieto pastored, many people would ask him to tell the story of the League. But he could not limit himself to tell the good parts... What about the ugly parts? Would he ignore them?

But you remain forever, O Jehovah, And your fame will endure for all generations.

Psalm 102:12

One day, Fidel invited Nicaraguan writer Ernesto Cardenal for a ride in his car. They drove up and down the same road in Vedado several times, just to make some time, to talk. Cardenal was a kind of link between Cuba and the rebel forces fighting Somoza in Central America. The curious thing about it is that the poet was in a group that was hard to classify at the time: on the one hand, he was a confessed admirer of the Revolution and, on the other, he was a fervent Catholic. That meeting should have taken place in the early 70s, at a time when—as per scholars—there were great tensions between the state and religion in Cuba. The situation of believers in a socialist state came up during those four hours. “We had a revolutionary priest here. It’s a shame you didn’t meet him. He passed away. He was a very good friend of ours...”

“Yes,”—Cardenal replied—“he was father Sardiñas. And he was a Commander...” “He was a Commander, indeed. He was a good priest. And a good revolutionary man. And a good guerrilla man. We baptized many children in Sierra Maestra. People had faith back then. Both of us would search for children who had not been baptized and we would baptize them. We baptized more than a hundred. I was their godfather. I have more than a hundred godsons in Sierra Maestra.”

“I heard about the behavior of the Catholic Church here in Cuba.” “The Catholic Church here was not good. They didn’t resemble Catholics in the rest of Latin American countries. You people have been with the poor and natives. The nature of Catholicism in Cuba was bourgeois, classist. Catholicism was the religion of the rich. Protestants were more involved with the common people.”

“I’ve been told that they didn’t have so many conflicts with the Revolution.” “That’s right. They didn’t have so many conflicts.”⁷⁹

Urbano

According to Urbano’s and other LEC members’ testimonials, *the 70s were harsh times for this church*. Eggs and tomatoes-covered facades were usual. It was common to find someone interrupting worship to empty their trash can all over the ais-

⁷⁹ Free version of the conversation between Fidel Castro and Ernesto Cardenal cited in Luis Báez: *Asíes Fidel*, Abril, Havana, 2009, pp. 106-107.

le; and insults could be heard at any time. “I remember once when I was entering the church—Urbano recalls—and one egg nearly grazed my face; it hit the wall. I looked back but there was no one around. The entire 45th street was deserted.”

“Then, I watched a couple of kids from the neighborhood coming out of a corner and running in my direction.” One of them asked him to lean towards him. They wanted to tell him something. Then, quietly, as if they were afraid of something, they let it out: “The policeman across the church was the one who threw the egg.” “You can imagine!”—Urbano says in a laughter, as if he was tired. What else is there to do when the ones in charge of maintaining law and order are at the top of the crime list? Where can we go and sue? Who can we trust?

“We only trust God, Yoe. We only trust God.”

Fernando Martínez Heredia is one of the most perceptive thinkers in contemporary Cuba. He is one of the intellectuals that better understand the 20th century in the island. Honoring his fruitful wisdom, he has approached various topics, including those related to the links between the church and the state. From his perspective, 1959 marked the moment when the schism between politics and religion—which we inherited from the 1930’s Revolution—grows. The ecclesiastic opposition—mainly Catholic—to the changes occurring in the 1960s drifted both adversaries apart even more.

However, Heredia points out that the leaders of the Revolution were influenced by “two ideologies that promoted extreme secularization: western radicalism and the soviet branch of Marxism”.⁸⁰ The tensions between the church and the state in the early 70s rose to levels unseen before. Consequently, this increased the “irreligious social pressure”.⁸¹ Heredia further explains that the imposition of scientific atheism “was both a huge strategic mistake and a painful experience for many believers. Religion was seen as an obscurantist entity about to happily disappear”.⁸²

TEACHERS ENDORSE THE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES FOR THE UPCOMING YEARS

Full Text Of The Declaration Of The First National Congress On Education And Culture To Be Found At Pages 2, 3 And 4.

(Granma, May 1, 1971)

“Education and culture make a homogeneous whole. But we have to link these activities to the daily task of shaping the new man.”

⁸⁰ Fernando Martínez Heredia: El corrimiento hacia el rojo, Letras Cubanas, Havana, 2001, p. 54.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ibidem.

Commander Belarmino Castilla, Minister of Education.

(The Official Gazette of Cuba. March-April, 1971)

The Cuban Protestant movement did not have many historians and analysts. However, the perseverance of professor María del Carmen Domínguez has made her an authority on the subject. She does not work at a Seminary nor at a church, but in a secular higher education institution. While working at the University of Camagüey, she wrote many books about the Evangelical presence in the largest of the Antilles. She made an interesting inventory of the main events that had impacted negatively on different churches in the 70s. Events that involved state institutions and reflected their segregationist policy.

Let’s analyze these events that left their mark on the Church in Cuba in the 70s, from Dr Domínguez’ perspective. In her opinion, the First National Congress on Education and Culture that was held in April, 1971, laid the foundations of atheism in our society.⁸³ In addition to the separation of the Church and the State, and the former and the educational institutions “at all levels”,⁸⁴ the concluding document of the event indicated that the state was adopting a policy of “not fostering, supporting or helping religious groups, nor asking anything from them”.⁸⁵ This policy destroyed all attempts of communication, cooperation and dialog between the state and different social sectors. The document also stated that the Revolution did not share nor support any religious belief or belief derived from it. Domínguez asserts that the Congress provided a setting for “declaring— from that moment on—Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology, and atheism as the expression of it. Basically, the construction of socialism was based on Marxist orthodoxy concepts which were introduced in the national high school, senior high school and university curricula”.⁸⁶

e) The Revolution respects the individual right of religious belief and worship. It does not impose, persecute nor suppresses the religious beliefs of its citizens.

(Granma, May 1, 1971)

To tell in silence

An old lady from the League told me that glory was to be found everywhere as long as one believes in God. She was a teacher’s assistant at a school near her house in the 70s. A friend of hers happened to say that she visited the League very often.

⁸³ Carlos Molina: Protestantismo en Cuba. Recuento histórico y perspectivas desde sus orígenes hasta principios del siglo XIX, Caminos, Havana, 2013, p. 167-168.

⁸⁴ “Declaration of the First National Congress on Education and Culture”, Granma, Havana, Saturday, May 1, 1971, p.3

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Carlos Molina: Protestantismo en Cuba. Recuento histórico y perspectivas desde sus orígenes hasta principios del siglo XIX, Caminos, Havana, 2013, p. 167-168.

My interlocutor knew about her friend's slip-up when she was summoned to the principal's office: she could no longer remain at the school, nor work in any other educational institution; as a matter of fact, they wondered how she had managed to get her position while being a Christian.

f) With the socialist construction at the center, the Revolution embraces everyone—regardless of religious beliefs—and gives them opportunity in its transforming work.

(Granma, May 1, 1971)

On November 1971, Fidel travels to Chile to meet Salvador Allende who was a socialist as well. There, Massón Sena recalls, "he stressed that the rapprochement between Christians and Marxists was strategic; together, they could face the liberation process of the oppressed people".⁸⁷ Then again, an atheistic section was created within the Department of Revolutionary Orientation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Professor Aurelio Alonso, Social Sciences National Award winner in 2013, declared that, for years, being a member of a church defined whether or not you were accepted into the university, for instance. This happened mainly in education, journalism, and psychology-related careers, which were the ones that shaped ideologies.⁸⁸

Alonso has written on the subject: "institutional atheistic discrimination—tacitly regularized even at the First Congress of the PCC in 1975—remained in our society for almost three decades; it started in the second half of the 1960s and lasted until the 90s. (...) The question "do you have any religious belief?" became a bureaucratic instrument to prevent political access, and turned into a tacit sign of elective restriction".⁸⁹ Fortunately, those years are over. I know people who are currently studying those majors without denying their faith. As a matter of fact, no one questioned my beliefs when I did the Aptitude Tests for Journalism. Although, there is still much prejudice in my field. The centralized mass media here is a soviet replica, and the issue of religion is still "consulted", as if it was an illness.

⁸⁷ Caridad Massón Sena: op. cit., p. 14.

⁸⁸ Omar Valiño: "Viajo siempre con la Isla en peso. Entrevista con Alberto Sarraín", *The Official Gazette of Cuba*, Havana, 2010.

⁸⁹ Aurelio Alonso: ¿Dónde se origina la marcada reanimación de la práctica religiosa en Cuba? ¿Qué peso tendrá en el conjunto de las relaciones sociales?, Presentation at the Seminary celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, 2010.

TWELVE

The top brass was ratified on March 18, 1971⁹⁰ to lead during the 1971-1973 biennium. There were changes among the Board Members: Alejandro Laredo González aged 22, was officially welcomed as a member; he was probably the youngest board member in the history of the denomination. A year later, he was appointed Church Secretary.⁹¹ The presence of young people on the LEC's board was rare during the first years. Actually, Evelio Martínez (Vice president)⁹² and Abner Toirac (Secretary),⁹³ were very young when they became board members. They were only 27 and 26 years respectively, and in Toirac's case, he had been in his position since he was 21 years old.

Gloria Jorge

I converted thanks to Nieto and his wife. My children attended the same school as Ale and Estercita. I started relating to them and their parents; but I never crossed their house entrance. They invited me over, but I did not accept. One day, I went to church so as not to offend them. I started to feel attracted to it, more, and more, until I converted. One of my neighbors told me:

"You have lost your mind! You have gotten into religion!" A month went by. I started telling her about God. One day, she was all dressed up; I asked her where she was going, and she replied: "I'm going to church with you."

They were my spiritual parents. They were loved even by the non-converted. They visited sick people disregarding their faith. Ester was special. They were not pastors to my children, but parents. My husband had an accident, once, and Ester took my children with her and took care of them until I was able to pick them

⁹⁰ Minute 79.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² His name was removed from the LEC's membership "as agreed by the Consistory" and stated in the Minute 94 of a meeting held on May 31.

⁹³ His membership was cancelled at his own request due to his impossibility to attend the LEC on a regular basis. He seemed to have spent too much time working in Matanzas (he had not been able to attend board meetings several months before), as per Minute 90 of a meeting held on January 31.

up. Nieto used to repair irons and electrical appliances. The pastor was there for us whatever our problem was. Alejandrino said once:

“I’m glad I don’t know a thing about repairing because I don’t have the time to do it.” His dad was constantly called to repair irons, fans, all electrical appliances. I called the pastoral house “the emergency house”, because that was the place to go whenever we had a problem.

Pablo Mejías

The church had no discipleship or anything like that, we came to church because of our parents. As I grew up, I thought I was mature enough to take my own decisions. That’s when conflicts started at home, because I no longer wished to go to church. Social and peer pressure influenced my decision. You could get a black mark on your student file just for being a Christian; you could get challenged by your peers at 4:20 pm⁹⁴ just because you were a Christian. Apparently, Nieto noticed my alienation and talked to me. Teenagers are like puppies: they get attached to whoever gives them a friendly pat on the head. Unlike my father, who was militarily strict even at home, the pastor was very friendly. I was always at church, hiding away from my father’s severity. Perhaps, that’s why Ale and I became so close. In 2009, the League lost its leader, but I lost a friend from my childhood, a friend from my teenage years, and an adviser when I took the wrong path. At some point during my chaotic teenage years, Ale followed me everywhere. We would go to 15th birthday parties, and dance; but his father was measured and just said: “God will bring them back”. And He did take us back, although it took Him some time in my case.

Gloria Jorge

People loved Alejandrino because they knew him since he was a child and he was very kind. I took him to the beach with Estercita more than once. They and my children grew up together, and they all shared with the rest of the kids in our block. Everyone loved them. Honestly, there was a time during Alejandrino’s adolescence when he wasn’t very interested in working for the League. Nieto said:

“I just let him be.”

He started practicing biking until he fell off his bike and smashed into the pavement; he scraped his arm, and never practiced cycling again. Then, he wanted to be a military man. He never applied to the *Camilitos*;⁹⁵ he only mentioned he

⁹⁴ TN: In Cuba, the school day ended (and still does) at 4:20 pm. It was the perfect time for students to set up fights to settle things up.

⁹⁵ TN: Name for military high schools and students attending that type of school.

would do so. He didn’t even enroll in the Military Service. He had a health issue and was declared *unfit*.

He had been born and raised at a pastoral house. He had gone through shortages and limitations. I did not wish for anybody to become a pastor. For me, being a pastor meant poverty, humiliation, privation, and suffering. I had seen it and suffered it myself; it was about time to make changes. I had promised myself to do so, and was going to do my best to fulfill it. But God remembered what I had forgotten. I began to preach when I was 8, and I was usually invited to different churches and events. But I had forgotten it all. My life was not set on the right path...

Alejandro Nieto Selles, Hogar Magazine, May-June, 2010

Álida León

He had had a remarkable spiritual experience by the time he reconciled with the Lord in his teens. When he was a child, he was a Christian; he even preached when he was 8; but there was a moment in his life, during his teens, when his behavior was sinful. He never stopped going to church; he would play the accordion and leave right afterwards. Even though he never drank or smoked, he did commit sin when having intercourse with women. He went on and on with that kind of life until one day when he shut himself in the temple for a week and cried for his sin. The Lord called him and said: “*leave everything behind and serve me; before I made you in your mother’s womb, I chose you*”. Those were the words that God said to him—the same words he had always rejected.

Ester Selles

“Hey, priest! What are you going to study?”

When he finished high school, his classmates made fun of him and asked him that kind of question because he was willing to serve God. He was very smart; he could have chosen any major. His teachers were happy with him. Their reports on Alejandrino were excellent. He was an outstanding student.

Pablo Mejías

I had good grades at school; Nieto was confident about my future so he suggested that I applied to Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary.

I never enrolled, though, because I stopped going to church. I believe that I drifted completely apart from the church in 1973, when I was given the UJC card.⁹⁶ One could not be religious to become a UJC member. I had to talk to three members of the Communist Party who lived nearby into not revealing that used to go to church, otherwise I would not be accepted as member of the

⁹⁶ Spanish for Young Communist League.

organization. They could not even find out that my mother was a Christian during the verification process. Despite the fact that my grades were excellent (Nieto had warned us: “you have to get the maximum score at every test, even if they attack you”), my political record would be given a black mark if they found out that I was a believer. But Nieto sent some youths to study at Los Pinos in the 70s. Samuel Seymore was among them. They all graduated, and although the League was just one temple and the vision of creating missions throughout the island did not exist, they all joined Ale and worked to change this church.

It wasn't until 1994 that the LEC's own biblical institute was created. But, how did the League's leaders prepare prior to that date? In September, 1970,⁹⁷ the Board decided to give four young men a grant (in the form of a scholarship) to study at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary. It was the first time that the denomination sent students to this renowned institution.

Oscar León has referred to the solidarity of Cuban protestants. According to León, the Biblical Institute of the Assemblies of God was closed in 1963, and some Seminaries—such as Los Pinos Nuevos—decided to fund the studies of their trainee leaders. Nieto Campos had studied there, and he had learned that kind of passive liturgy that doesn't involve the Holy Spirit. And he brought that to the League in 1966”. Perhaps, due to his background, the League could have been granted full enrollment for its students. In May, 1974 “(...) three young students graduated from the Seminary; they would work at Los Pinos Nuevos Evangelical Convention”.⁹⁸ Nearly four years had passed since the first group enrolled in the Seminary. The institution's financial instability led it to cover only half of students' expenses during the 1972-1973 academic year.⁹⁹ But there are written records of the LEC's sacrifice to fund their students' studies. It is funny that a part of that investment—so to speak—did not remain at the LEC, but ended up serving at other denominations.

Gloria Jorge

What did we do to raise funds for our students? We opened fairs and we collected tithes from almost everyone. Some families supported us, and cooperated with us. Our students studied for about three years.

Pablo Mejías

As long as I recall, we sent two groups of students. The first group graduated and became pastors. Alejandrino and Estercita joined the second group. She

⁹⁷ As per Minute 73 of a meeting held on the 29th.

⁹⁸ As per Minute 120 of a meeting held on the 31st.

⁹⁹ As per Minute 97 of a meeting held on August 31, 1972. Two thousand pesos were taken from the funds for that purpose. This situation was probably conditioned by the League's Convention to be held the following month.

studied Christian Education for two years, and he studied Theology for four years. These students used to teach at Summer Schools. Árida would come and engage with the League. She was either involved with him or they were already in love. Everyone knew who Árida was in 1982 because they had met her. I took a different path. I enrolled in the Navy, near Barlovento, in Santa Fe, in 1974. There were some sailors in the neighborhood. They were all dressed up, had money and were part of the few people who were allowed to go out of the country without restriction. I was attracted to that kind of life; I wanted to be one of them.

Time went by; I became an officer at the Cuban Navy and travelled the world. However, the link that joined me to the League never broke. Nieto and Ester would visit my mum very often and I would talk to them. They were like my other parents to me.

Also, the only telephone in the neighborhood was at the church. I would call the League from anywhere in the world so they could give my news to my family. Nieto and his wife were the ones who usually answered the phone. They both gave me advice, and let me know that they were praying for me. They had this familiar voice that I will always remember.

Gloria Jorge

Nieto's only source of income was the salary he received from the church; he did not charge for any of the jobs I mentioned before. Some brothers gave him food and stuff for the house. He preached at some churches that gave him the offering collected that day. But his salary was really low. He worked more than what he earned. He was the head of the League, and he was also the head of the *Confraternidad Interdenominacional de Ministros y Pastores Evangélicos de Cuba (CIMPEC)*.¹⁰⁰

Pablo Mejías

That is an organization for pastors. There were so many problems between the State and the churches since the triumph of the Revolution, that pastors decided to unite, share and support each other. Moving to a different topic, there were some changes under Alejandro sr.'s, leadership. The former regulations, votes, and the position of Legal Secretary and board members, etc. were invalidated.

¹⁰⁰ The CIMPEC (Spanish for Interdenominational Fraternity of Evangelical Ministers and Pastors of Cuba) was founded by a group of pastors from different denominations in the summer of 1962 at Las Palmas Biblical Institute, Cabañas bay, in Northeastern Havana. This association works exclusively with leaders from more than forty denominations.

He also organized the record of League's members. According to my mum, baptisms were exclusively held on Sundays, and since our church did not have a baptistry, the *Iglesia de Dios* (Church of God)—which was located passed 51st street—let us use theirs.

Fumero, who was a close friend with Nieto, was their pastor. There was such a mess here, that my mum had attended service since 1958, and it wasn't until 1974 that she immersed in the waters of baptism.

THIRTEEN

To tell in silence

Informal talk with one of the current leaders of the League: Some workmen under my command used to take containers full of Bibles to Cuba; we had orders to set them on fire before reaching our final destination.

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A neighbor at the temple:

They frequently search Nieto Campos' church. A few *MININT* officials¹⁰¹ showed up by surprise to put everything upside down, and confiscated, for instance, one of the two typewriters that were at the LEC since Danilo's times. The highest-ranking official said: "why do you need two typewriters for?" They also seized the tape recorders that people gave the old man as presents. I used to travel a lot back then, so I had to lend the pastor the tape recorder from my work whenever he needed it.

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A friend of Ester Selles':

During the public trials held at Marianao Grand Movie Theater, near 124th and 51st St., Nieto and Ester were called to as witnesses because a young lady from the League was planning to leave the country. The LEC was accused of ideological diversionism and it was given a fine of 100 pesos. I joined them in court, and I was about to shout: "injustice!" When I was about to open my mouth, Ester told me: "Don't say anything! We're good!" Several members of the congregation made our contribution to pay the fine. The church barely had funds.

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They tell me about another event that took place at that time:

a serious fight across the temple. Some men in the street had made a pass at a girl from the church, and a young man went in her defense.... Oh, my! The place was full of thugs within seconds. Nieto was standing impassive at the church entrance when two men approached him and started to punch him in

¹⁰¹ Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Cuba.

the stomach. I will never forget that: he remained as if no one had touched him at all, he didn't utter a word. A few police cars arrived and lots of people were arrested... and guess who got a fine for public disorder?

As Pastor Francisco de Asís Raúl Santamaría (from the Pentecostal Christian Church) pointed out, "fines for doing nothing at all"¹⁰² were part of their agenda for harassing church-goers.

Nieto Campos' pastorate witnessed a shower of fines, indeed. These events appear in the Minute Book and are confirmed by witnesses. The first police search was conducted on November 27, 1966.¹⁰³ On that occasion, the Treasurer reported that monthly expenses had been fully covered "except for the money to pay the seventy-five-pesos fine, which we still don't have". On November, 1972 a fine of the same amount was imposed by the Associations Registry right after an inspection.¹⁰⁴ Again, the reasons for the fine were never explained.

But, on October 25, 1973 a huge fine was about to shake the grounds of the denomination. On that day, the President informed the board that the books and Church Regulations had been examined by the authorities.¹⁰⁵ The inspection resulted in a fine of 375 pesos. The inspectors claimed that Article 15 of the Church Regulations had been violated. Nieto differed on the measure. He lost his composure and notified the board of his intentions to file an appeal. (The Board of Directors had agreed to make changes to the regulations since March, 1972.¹⁰⁶ They appointed a committee for that purpose, but they seemed to have made no significant progress).

The following month,¹⁰⁷ the Treasury reported that all expenses had been covered, but the fine of 375 pesos could not be paid. They had to get a loan in order to pay for it. Alejandro Laredo asserted that the fine was imposed to members of the Board of Directors equally. To make matters worse, the Registry ordered that the Church did not pay Nieto his salary until the Regulations were changed.¹⁰⁸ On top of the restricted economic situation, the pastoral family had to exclusively depend on church members' financial aid for nine months. An extraordinary session of the Board was held in December to reach an unprecedented agreement: to change the LEC's statutes for the first time since their legal creation in 1953. And so, they made the modifications: "following directions

¹⁰² Caridad Massón Sena: op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁰³ Minute 25.

¹⁰⁴ As per Minute 100 of a meeting held on the 30th of that month.

¹⁰⁵ As per Minute 112 of a meeting held on October 30, 1973.

¹⁰⁶ As per Minute 92 of a meeting held on the 31st of that month.

¹⁰⁷ As per Minute 113 of a meeting held on November 30, 1973.

¹⁰⁸ As per Minute 118 of a meeting held on March 30, 1974.

from the Associations Registry, most of the current articles are being modified".¹⁰⁹ New Church Regulations were written over the course of those days. They were ratified by that MININT's¹¹⁰ branch on July 9, 1974 and were in force for over 30 years.

¹⁰⁹ As per Minute 114 of a meeting held on December 24, 1973.

¹¹⁰ The Ministry of Justice will be in charge of it years later.

FOURTEEN

September 18 used to be held as a celebration day of yesteryear. The League held its first worship at its temple in 1954. Hence, 2014 was the chosen year to celebrate the League's 60th anniversary. They could have picked another year such as 1949 (when the service was held at the wooden house), or 1953 (when the LEC was given a legal status). Árida León relates that it wasn't until 1994 that the institution's anniversaries were celebrated. They use to organize one of the two annual¹¹¹ conventions of the League every September before 1994 to recall that date.

On the year of the 20th anniversary of the temple's foundation—1974—, people contributed with funds from earlier that year to paint and repair the building—the pastoral house included.¹¹² And that's the way it's been ever since.

They kept the festive tradition during that decade that was marked by the signs of renovation and forced restraint, among others. The internal order at the League was achieved by means of a strict observance of the institutional regulations during those years. This was most likely a result of the hostility of the times. So much so, that the Secretary reported that Duban Guerrero did not appear in the Minute Book as a member, "and, therefore, he should not hold any position at the Board. As a result, he was removed from his position as a board member".¹¹³ Given the need to fill an empty seat at the Board, four months later Arnaldo González Villalonga was unanimously elected to become a board member.¹¹⁴

Alejandro Laredo recounts that it was the decade when men were grouped in the Gentlemen's Department. He was the group's first leader until mid-70s when he and his wife moved to Cienfuegos. He was replaced by Urbano. Another distinctive feature of the 70s was the liturgical change that happened by mid-decade. Ester Selles claims that

the Women's Department was actively watching and praying during those years. That decade witnessed changes that shook the denomination's very foundations.

Urbano

One night during worship, there were some events unknown to Urbano. A group of young people began to dance in a way never seen by people before. The clapping of hands resounded all over the place. "Marlene, Olga Lidia's younger sister, was barely 10 years and she was jumping up and down, she would prophesy and tell the word of the Lord to the elders,"—Urbano recalls. He was frightened to the core at church.

"I thought it was the devil's hand work, and ran home. I was very perturbed. I got my Bible to try to forget about it, and when I opened it, guess what the Lord told me. At the beginning of the page there was written a verse saying that young men and old men will dance together in front of him." Urbano was stunned by those words.

"God had spoken to me in such a way that I went back to the church! I understood that one could maintain a sense of decorum and yet, dance to whatever beat you hear because He delights in his people's praise. But, to be honest, many people had a hard time accepting that. Years and years went by, and all that was a sacrilege to them." According to Urbano, Nieto sr. was never fond of that noise.

Gloria Jorge

Nieto had told me that I had a Pentecostal spirit, because I had always enjoyed clapping and lively chants. I like the way it is right now because there was no such joy before. People sang, but they didn't clap their hands. Leaders from other denominations came and preached. Fumero, who was a pastor at the Iglesia de Dios (Church of God) in Cuba, visited the League frequently. There was not much resistance to change; there were only few reluctant people. The charismatic movement reached its peak with Alejandrino and he had young people as his followers.

¹¹¹ According to José Luis Salinas, the annual conventions were brotherhoods of pastors. He states that they are held in the summer.

¹¹² Minute 118.

¹¹³ As per Minute 86 of a meeting held on September 30.

¹¹⁴ As per Minute 90 of a meeting held on January 31, 1972.

A MATTER OF GENERATIONS

It pours rain every summer afternoon, in attempts to relieve the heat in the city. The rain coming from the sky tries to reach the sea by any route. And when the drain and sewer system overflow, it relies on gravity to take it down and down the streets. Mother and daughter seat and reminisce, while watching the river flow and trying to ignore the noise coming from large rain drops. Olga Lidia and Edith. The former was the president of the Youth Department by mid 70s... Well, vice... vice president, she explains. Nieto Campos didn't let young people lead departments without an adult's supervision. That's why Ángel González, a news broadcaster who had been fired for being an active member of Evangelical groups, devoted his time to share with the new generations at the LEC. Ángel, who was a thirty-and-so young man, well educated, charming, had much to do with the spiritual renewal experienced at the League in the mid-70s. People began to talk about the Holy Spirit for the first time, and its role during worship became more and more prominent. Olga Lidia asserts that Ester Selles, Sea Sánchez, Lilia Reyes and dozens of sisters were to blame for that beautiful change. They would pray, individually and in groups, for God to fill the church, for God to bring His fire to the congregation. Her mother nods her head in agreement. She was the Treasurer of the Lady's Department back then; she knows what her daughter is talking about. Now and again, Edith restates that those were sublime times. There are days in which Olga Lidia tells her that those times are water under the bridge, but today is not one of them. The afternoon comes to end and both of them, moved by their memories and nostalgia, become its witnesses.

Edith Machado: I started to visit the League in 1972. How did I get there? I was mentally ill, I had lost my mind. People had to look after me; they could not lose sight of me for one minute. I was in hospital several times.

When I came to church, I brought my three children with me. The youngest one, Marlén, was a little over a year. She and Olga Lidia enjoyed coming here so much, that I would say to them that I was going to set up a bed in the temple for them to be here 24/7. My sister lived nearby and knew Lilia Reyes, one of the leaders of the League who started visiting me, and I came to Church because of

her. When I first came, there were only four or five people here. My girls would lie down on the pew until falling asleep. You can't do that today! Now everyone wants to be inside the temple even though they're cramped in there. I always say that this church has been wonderful to me, and that God has done a super work here. God's ways are supernatural, special. Everything He does is great. Our situation was unusual. We went to church, we came home for dinner and went back to church.

Those were wonderful times. My youngest daughter, Marlén, was 9 years old—she was born in 1970—when the revival began. It all started with pastor Ester; but when Alejandrino arrived—he was our youngest pastor—the church grew because God worked through him. His preaching was strong, —I mean it—he attracted people! You could tell that it wasn't him who spoke, but the Word of God itself. The revival grew stronger with Alejandrino; he was young and full of energy. I am old now, but I see the church full of young people and I thank God for them; I'm marveled at their lives. They even preach at worship. We didn't see that before, although there were some like Alejandro Laredo that would stand out. The League paid for the studies of some of them at the Seminary. Samuel Seymour Jr., who died recently; Arnoldo González; and Alejandrino himself.

Olga Lidia: Most of them ended up carrying out missionary activities in other churches because the League didn't have missions of its own back then. For instance, Arnoldo worked at the Assemblies of God.

Edith Machado: With time, the church moved to another stage, a period of lively spiritual revival; the Holy Spirit began to act in special ways... I'm moved by the fact of just talking about it, because I felt something really huge.

Yoe Suárez: The 70s gave way to the greatest liturgical change in the LEC's history. A change that would define the way the LEC is today. The denomination became charismatic (although this character reached its peak with Alejandro Jr. the following decade). At the same time, there was a revival at the spiritual level only compared to the one that was going to take place 20 years later. How do you remember those moments?

Olga Lidia: My parents—including my dad, who wasn't a believer—always served God by welcoming the pastors that Nieto Campos invited over. They would have lunch and dinner here. Even Orson Vila joined us at our table once. He was actually the one who put some “order” to this Charismatic feeling we started to experience as a denomination by mid-decade.

Yoe Suárez: Orson was the pastor of a church in Camagüey and he knew very well the Pentecostals.

Olga Lidia: Absolutely! He helped us to have a better understanding of how it was to be filled with the Holy Spirit and speak different languages. Before he came, Nieto had invited a charismatic evangelist who lived near our temple to minister and preach about the Holy Spirit. Everything was all right at the beginning, but then, we had to let him go slowly because the man made a few people upset, my mother included.

Yoe Suárez: Both Alejandro sr. and Alejandro Jr. pastored the League in complex moments. However, the latter has a courage which I haven't heard of about the former. Why do you think they both behaved so differently? Is it because of their personality? Is it their age?

Olga Lidia: I think it's because they both lived in different times. God opened doors eventually.

Alejandrito's courage is due to his father's strength; he stood up firm when he had to. I was put under pressure, and I was just a member. How do you think things were for him? He was taken to the police station; his church was searched more than once... We never knew what they were looking for.

Edith Machado: The problem was that—as per the way of thinking back then—all religious people (Catholics, Jehovah's witnesses, Adventists, Pentecostals) were tagged counterrevolutionaries or considered little reliable at best. As simple as that...

Olga Lidia: Catholics would not dare say they were believers at any educational institution. The only ones that kept their faith were Jehovah's witnesses and us. There was a girl who was a part of them—I wish God has guided her to the path of Truth—and she was faithful indeed.

Edith Machado: I thank God every day, because when I converted to Christianity, He gave me such a strength—the strength I needed back then—to say that I was a Christian. It was very difficult.

Olga Lidia: Of course, mum! The League wasn't able to grow outside if it had not grown inside its members. Ever since Alejandro was in the Seminary the local church began to change, to move in that sense. It wasn't crowded, but there was a group of very active youth who attended Saturday services. That day the temple was full of young people from all over the city and all denominations: Methodists, Baptists, *gedeonitas* (Gideonites). Saturday services were a success in Havana; they were the best of their kind for young people in the capital city.

Some of the youth who used to visit our church are leaders at the Methodist and Pentecostal churches. Something that we didn't have back then were camps. I went to some inter-denominational camps when I was a child. Cedros del Líbano which was in Pinar del Río, belonged to the Free Baptist church; they allocated some seats for the League and the Methodist church, among others. We fraternized with each other, and everyone in the different youth groups knew one another. I visited camps long before going to college.

Yoe Suárez: Much has been said about how Christians were marginalized at that time. They would not be allowed to apply to certain university programs, but I see that your experience is different...

Olga Lidia: Nieto sr. always said to us that we had to stand out from the crowd; wherever we were we had to be the best. He would say: "If you're a mango tree, then you have to produce the best mangos; the nicest, the sweetest mangos". I was always at the top of the class at every school I attended. If you had to choose the best student, then, that was me. But I had a problem: I was a Christian. They wouldn't recognize my merit, so they humiliated me instead. There was a military man at my high school, and every time he passed by my side, he would tell me: "I'm watching you" [while pointing two V-sign fingers at his eyes]. You can imagine what it means for a girl to be coerced like that! Some other times, I was accused of being a counterrevolutionary...

Edith Machado: I was accused as well...of being an irresponsible mother; of taking my daughters to church and depriving them of the possibility of studying.

Olga Lidia: I graduated from high school in 1982, and I was planning to enter Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary, but that year there were no vacancies for students other than those who were members of that denomination. My friends asked me if I was not going to apply to another university course. They accepted students into their chosen course according to their position on the student rankings. I didn't care much about that and I told my friends to fill in the application card for me. "Choose a course related to math, numbers or so". Shortly after that, I was accepted into Accounting.

When I entered the Faculty, I was the weirdo: I was the only Christian and I was wearing a mid-skirt when all the girls my age were wearing mini-skirts.

Sometimes I'd say: "Lord, I want to be invisible".

The youth from the 70s and 80s went out in groups and evangelized in Santa Fe, the Malecón, all over the city and beyond. When I was in high school, a friend of mine and I were taken to the police station known as La Sexta. What was our

crime? To preach on the streets. We were detained the entire day until almost 10 pm. We were held in a room where they told us: "We are watching you; you are well indoctrinated".

Edith Machado: I went for them, of course. I was received by some military men, and guess what they told me! That they were like God because they did good deeds as well.

EIGHTY

The future of wicked people will be cut off. The salvation of the righteous is from Jehovah; He is their fortress in the time of distress. Jehovah will help them and rescue them.

He will rescue them from the wicked and save them, Because they take refuge in him.

Psalm 37:38-40

SIXTEEN

Oscar León

Everything that happened in the LEC's history from the 80s onward we owe it to the time Ale spent at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary. He was there with other young students from the Assemblies. They were about eighteen; Eliseo Vilar, our superintendent, and Álda were among them. (They had to delay their courtship because the institution did not allow students to have relationships; we knew that they were involved because they told us right away, but they were nothing to everyone else). He entered a new stage at the Seminary; later on, he transferred his experience to his church. From that moment, there were glorious days at the League. I remember that God used sister Sea—who was a leader—through the Prophecy. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were manifesting and there was a spiritual revival. He was the one who revolutionized the entire denomination. Los Pinos Nuevos' liturgy is different from the Assemblies of God's or the current League's. But I can tell you an anecdote that reflects the prevailing respect and familiarity at the Institute. There were important events on graduation day. When the ceremony was over, the boys were eager to search for God. They were not allowed at the Institute's tabernacle late that night. It was past 10 o'clock, and it was only 15 minutes for the bell to ring, sending students to their dormitories. Then, Alejandro suggested that they went praying far away from the Institute under some mango trees. Many youths gathered. I wasn't sleepy. When I was about to leave to the meeting spot, the bell stopped me. People started to come out of the dorms. Did the fire alarm go off? There was chaos for a few seconds. The school director runstowards the bell, but there's no one there. Apparently, someone had thought it funny to wake the entire Institute up. Once the order was restored, I headed towards the mango trees. Ministering had already started. The Holy Spirit was providing some with prophecies, and baptizing others. It all happened in the dark of the night. At some point, the witnesses began to testify. A weeping boy came out of the group and confessed that he had rang

the bell. Many of the presents did not understand what the boy was talking about because the mango plantation was far off the temple. But I did know what he was referring to, and I almost burst out laughing. That night was crucial. At least five young students from Los Pinos Nuevos, who were with us that night, received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Their new charismatic condition made them unsuitable for their denomination; therefore, they were expelled from it. Arnoldo González and Efraín Paz were among them. They became members of our denomination. The change they experienced that night were imprinted on Alejandro's life, and marked a turning point in the Evangelical League's history.

Ester Selles

The liturgy changed radically with my son. Everything changed, from the words used for preaching to something as simple as the inclusion of a drums kit for praising. We had pianos, trumpets, guitars, accordion. It's true that we didn't have the resources to get those instruments before Alejandrito came. But, indeed, he started a musical explosion, a renewal in the type of liturgy that people were used to at the League. Our denomination had been more passive since the beginning, because of its doctrine.

Pablo Mejías

He revolutionized the music. He removed the grand piano from the pulpit (which made everyone nervous because it was a historical piano; it dated back to the 50s) to make room for other musicians. Trumpets, drums, an accordion (which he played once in while).

Oscar León

The driving force behind the League at that time was the change to Charismatic worship. Alejandro sr. was a great minister but Alejandrito had a kind of magnetic power, an attraction over the youth. He and Álda had a good chemistry in this sense. So, the traditions that had been part of the League for so long started to change. The liturgy—once influenced by the Salvation Army—was now in the past.

A new process began; a process that brought about a revival to this Church; a process that was the prelude to the national events in the 90s.

Researcher Octavio Ríos has pointed out that the humble and traditional LEC became one of the most important evangelical denominations in the country from the 1980' onward. "It went from being a church in need to becoming a stronghold to help thousands of pastors, regardless of their denomination, thanks to the hand of God";¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Octavio Ríos Verdecia: Memorias del Pastor Benjamín de Quesada, CALITAD, Havana, 2013, p. 185.

*the Pentecostal author wrote. Alejandro Nieto's life and teachings left their mark on thousands of temples and leaders all over Cuba. Verdecia has described him as an unforgettable man; if there's some who doubts the power of words, that's not him. The following words from the ligueño pastor were to remain in his mind: "The goal is not to fill the church, but to fill the world with Christ".*¹¹⁶

SEVENTEEN

Now and again life runs and makes us run with it. Alejandro graduated from the Seminary in the center of the island, married Árida León on July 28, 1982, in Las Tunas, and began to pastor at the LEC on October 31, that year in Havana. It all happened so fast. Ester Selles recalls that her husband had passed such a responsibility on to a 22-year old man; but it wasn't long before his decision bore fruits: "We appointed him pastor, and ever since he was given the League, it started to grow rapidly and changed in many ways." "They are not mistaken when they say that Ale brought changes, one at a time,"—Pablo Mejías asserts. "More and more young people began to attend services... and they would clap!" Pablo hides a smile. Something comes to him from those years: "I have been told that the elders were angry at him because they found some of the charismatic things annoying. But Alejandrino earned everyone's respect, and the elders' that had left the church returned."

Alejandro Laredo

His dad always held Funeral Ceremonies for our brothers and sisters; we attended funerals in the neighborhood, even the non-Christian people's funerals. We visited sick people in hospitals as well; but upon Ale's arrival, we created organized groups of brothers who went to pray and preach at those places as long as people would give their permission beforehand. It was our way to reach people. New strategies came up with Alejandrino; all of them were based on the conviction that Cuba was our street, the space where each of us lived in. The cell group was a vision that emerged during his pastorate.

Many people want to go to Samaria and to the end of the Earth; but he decided to work here, in Jerusalem, in our island, teaching leaders and supporting churches.

That is, he promoted a whole new system that was aimed at fulfilling the promise of winning Cuba for Christ.

Ester Selles

The *Hogar* magazine idea, for instance, came up during a board meeting in 1983. I was the Women's President. And he suggested that one of the

¹¹⁶Idem.

departments launched a news bulletin. So, I told my secretary that we were going to make something more than a bulletin. However, it had nothing to do with what it is today; it wasn't so varied, and we had limited resources to produce it. You can imagine that my husband and I would cut out pictures to create a photomontage and photocopy them.

Oscar León

The first time I preached on this pulpit I believe that there were few people. It must have been 1982 or 1983. Then, there was an explosion of people. The more charismatic beliefs and the Cuba-for-Christ vision—which was Alejandro's idea—strengthened, the more people joined the denomination. The League grew dramatically thanks to the new tools and the fire of the Spirit. It suddenly became a shoulder for the rest of protestant denominations in the country to cry on. Alejandro had the vision to create literature; then, he founded Vida Plena Ministry and spread Christian books all over the island... for free! It didn't matter which denomination we belonged to; this was clearly God's work because it was very difficult to get the ink, print and distribute the copies. I'm sure of what I'm saying because I was the President of Christian Education at the Assemblies for 15 years, and we had to deal with this and other issues on a daily basis. There were lots of treaties. The League produced brochures on special occasions and adapted the words so they were suitable for all denominations. It had and still has an interdenominational role with a Christocentric doctrine. The League's vision was to equip the Church in Cuba with Christian literature. But Alejandro not only worked on producing literature, he acted as a sort of catalyst for the Biblical Societies to send us Bibles. We had a hard time for receiving one brochure or a New Testament. Before the Triumph of the Revolution they had an office in our country located near Neptuno St. It was managed by a brother whose last name was Perdomo. If there is a Society today in Cuba, it's because of Alejandro. No one talks much about it, and they're right not to do it; some things had to be done, and should not be revealed. But no one imagines the efforts that were done to give Bibles to the people. God provided Alejandro with opportunities to make lots of friends. Many brothers from abroad came to this church, because the League became a point of reference due to its growth, its energy, its rebellious vision. No one has the slightest idea of how many times he was conned. People approached him and requested resources to set up projects that never took off; or they asked him for money to travel abroad and never returned, and never paid him back. He was so devoted to serving people that he

rarely thought of himself first. He didn't even leave a house for himself, he didn't have a bank account.

I know for a fact that he did not become someone who praised money. God gave him resources, friends; but nothing depended on this. It all depended on the Lord's will.

Alejandro Laredo

The motto Cuba for Christ came up during Ale's pastorate and has marked this church's approach ever since. But it has also brought about confusion. It has created a lack of understanding among some sectors within the church and the government. Some people believe that the slogan refers to a change of government, and it has nothing to do with that. It refers one hundred per cent to a spiritual change.

ÁLIDA I

Álida wanted to go to college, but she made the “mistake (?)” of confessing that she had been born a Christian, and practiced Christianity. Rejection set her on a different path: she entered the most renowned Seminary in Cuba, and she went deeper with the Bible. There, she met a boy who changed her life. Because getting married is a life changing event.... or is it not? Shortly after, they unknowingly would change the lives of thousands of people.

Yoe Suárez: I'd like to start by talking about your relationship with Alejandro. When did you meet? I know that it all began at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary...

Álida León: I entered the Seminary in September, 1979. Alejandro was already studying there. I had met him before at a graduation ceremony that I attended at Los Pinos, and that's when I first saw him. We studied together for two years.

I enrolled for Christian Education and he was studying Theology; I was in a two-year program and he was in a four-year one. Estercita, his sister, had begun to study Music, but she changed her mind and enrolled in my course.

Yoe Suárez: Had you hear of the League before?

Álida León: Never. I was a member of the Assemblies of God.

Yoe Suárez: You and Alejandro got married after graduation. Didn't you?

Álida León: I graduated in May, 1981, but Ale was still studying because they were repairing the Seminary and the board had decided to take the students out sooner than expected, without doing the graduation ceremony. We got married in July 1982. He received his certification shortly after.

Yoe Suárez: Both of you began to pastor at the LEC right after you got married. How was the transition from Nieto sr. to Nieto Jr.?

Álida León: Ale had a job offer at other denominations, and also, the people from Los Pinos wanted him to remain there. But Nieto sr. had warned him before entering the Seminary: “You will pastor here when you graduate”. After 16 years as the League's pastor, on October 31, 1982, he officially handed the church over to us. Those were difficult times for us because we had to work on

what his father—who was a man of God, but was never baptized by the Holy Spirit—had done over those years. He didn't oppose what we did, but I believe it was difficult for him to see somebody else rebuild everything he had done, or have some other revelation. The transition was intense but we had to make some changes to the church. We were really involved in that process, and we didn't do more because of all the restrictions that prevented our expansion.

Yoe Suárez: I have heard about the great youth meetings that the League had in the 80s, personified by Alejandro's charisma.

Álida León: There was a spiritual revival during that decade, but mainly in the late 1980s. The church grew a lot; these words resounded all over Havana: “The League, Alejandro's church”. Many visited the church on Saturdays, mainly young people who attended youth service. They came from all over the city and all denominations. Before becoming a pastor, even before entering the Seminary, he had started a youth movement for vigil and prayer. He met with them in a sort of club, worship was different; it was more focused on reaching young people.

Yoe Suárez: Alejandro often talked about the moment when he was revealed the “Cuba for Christ” vision. Can you provide further details of the story?

Álida León: Some friends from the interior had invited Alejandro somewhere in the mountains on the center of the island to pray—I didn't join him that time. They drove all the way there and when they got to the place, they got off the car and prayed. When he got back, he told me about his unforgettable experience. They were invoking the Lord's name, praying for Cuba, when the presence of God descended suddenly and supernaturally, and they all fell in different places. He was laying on the ground when God revealed his presence. He felt His presence, literally, and heard His voice. God spoke to him: “I give you Cuba and you will convert it for Christ”. From that moment on, Ale interpreted those words as a call to remain in this island. Everyone was transformed at that place, but not everyone stayed in the country. Alejandro remained in the island because God had told him “it's here”.

This is one of the secrets to why we stayed here.

Yoe Suárez: You said that you had to make some changes during the transition from father to son. Can you mention some of the most important ones?

Álida León: Alejandro was different from his father. He was very active, he preached with such a power; his message was more evangelistic back then. There were many changes in the Church Government. We didn't have many statutes

like we do today, there were few of them and we had to make changes to service, to worship styles, to liturgy and introduce this Holy Spirit movement, because things were different in the past. It took us many nights of prayer and study. We only had the Lord to guide us; and with regards to Nieto, he was very kind to accept those changes. He told us: “Do as you think is best, and I will accept it as if was the Lord’s will”. He was very supportive, and never interfered with anything. I mean, he did not oppose anything. On the other hand, Ester remained a woman of prayer and continued to leading the fast back then.

Yoe Suárez: What about the members of the church? How did they take those changes?

Álida León: Most of them were adults, there were few young people among them not to say that there were none. The change was hard to some of them, but a new generation was beginning to empower. Then, we started to teach Biblical Studies at church; we started to teach the bases of the doctrine. We were the result of a merger because Alejandro had been born and grown here, I came from the Assemblies of God; we both studied at Los Pinos Nuevos, and Ale worked at several other denominations. Almost no one opposed those changes. Sea Sánchez, who was Urbano’s wife and one of the leaders here, was among the few who opposed the changes. But it was just at the beginning; later on, God used her to promote and be a part of the change because she was full of gifts. Things like that happened on a daily basis.

NINETEEN

Oscar León

There was a time when the church seemed to be force to fade away before disappearing for good. The silver lining, the cloud on the desert was the moment when Frei Betto came and interviewed Fidel for his book *Fidel and religion* that was to be written in 1985. The conversation began.

*There was a slowly change in the policy towards churchgoers in the 1980s. The Central Committee of the Communist Party’s Office for Religious Matters was created in 1985 and was directed by Dr José Felipe Carneado. In the words of Caridad Massón Sena, “a process to reassess the policies on religion and churchgoers had begun”.¹¹⁷ Let’s remember that this was the decade of the “Straightening of the path and negative tendencies process”; it was the time for state and party institutions to examine their conscience. According to professor María del Carmen Domínguez, that decade paved the way for the government and religious institutions to improve their relations. One of the reasons that led her to such conclusion was that the Cuban political model was moving further away from the dogmatist thinking of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁸ The approval of the PCC’s program in 1986 was fundamental because it recognized the need for believers to participate consciously in the building of a new society. There positive stories come along with some negative ones. The American missionary Kurt Urbanek has written that “the pressure on the church was renewed in 1980 due to the visit from Inspectors of the Associations Registry, who requested the list of members of local churches”¹¹⁹ Urbanek says that, on top of that, there were unwarranted arrests or detentions of Baptists leaders. In *Fidel and religion* ¹²⁰ Ernesto Cardenal recalls that “to Cuban’s and everyone’s surprise, Fidel (...) attacks the sectarian position of many Marxist people who have been anti-christians”.*

¹¹⁷ Caridad Massón Sena: *La Revolución Cubana en la vida de pastores y creyentes evangélicos*, Ediciones Memoria, Havana, 2006, p. 103.

¹¹⁸ María del Carmen Domínguez: op. cit., p. 170.

¹¹⁹ Kurt Urbanek: *Cuba’s great awakening*, Lexington, USA, 2013, p. 84.

¹²⁰ An extended interview with Fidel Castro about religion in Cuba, published by Frei Betto in the 80s. It brought about an open discussion on the role and conditions of believers in socialist Cuba.

And, perhaps, what's most important: "he thinks that Cuba's actions towards religion cannot be a model, and that things in Latin America ought to be different".¹²¹

Anyway, there is still prejudice against the common Christian. They're beginning to approach them; but they still don't trust them.

Urbano

Urbano was called in twice to the Le-Vam-Tan, the building that has hosted the municipal government since the 1950s. It is one of the tallest buildings in Marianao, and its offices were used to approve permanent surveillance, raids, and imprisonments orders. It is a reliable witness of our History.

The city gets darker as one follows the huge pavement river down 51st street. The spaces get narrower and green spots attempt to claim their place amid so much grey: houses destroyed by time and poverty. Urbano crossed the avenue where vendors cried out their products, people insulted others, and smoldering and dilapidated cars passed by. He went by the filthy amphitheater—left to its own fate—, and then an alley where bare-foot teenage boys played soccer. The closer he got to the Le-Vam-Tan the more imposing it looked. A sort of "light trial" was held on the building that morning; a trial against the leader and host to nearly 20 Christian worshipers from the LEC at his church-house on 82nd street. Urbano Durán Rodríguez listened to the demands from the judge and the colonel who presided over the accusatory meeting: meetings had to end, and he had to sign a minute full of who knows how many restrictions... He stood up. He would not sign the minute. As for the church-house, his apartment was going to continue to be a meeting spot. "And so I said to them,"—Urbano tells me while standing in the hallway of a crowded League, his hands resting on his cane—"why should I stop worship when you allow bembé on the same block where I live." Days later, the residents of the house located on 82nd street were awakened by an insistent knocking on the door. His older brother had sent someone to find out if he was ok...physically. Urbano wasn't worried about anything else other than the threats from authorities, but no one had beaten him. Some concerned neighbors knocked at his door and asked him the same question. But what was all the fuss about?

"Then I knew that the news about my visit to Le-Vam-Tan had been broadcasted on Radio Martí,"—Urbano recalls while shaking hands with some fellow congregants. I have no idea how they heard about it; but they could have got me into trouble. Somebody must have known about it, and the news spread

¹²¹ Ernesto Cardenal cited in Luis Báez: *Así es Fidel*, April, Havana, 2009, pp. 112.

like wildfire. Many people who knew me came knocking on my door all worried about me. The radio station had made too much of a fuss about what really happened. Urbano laughs as if that memory tickled him. "They had described me as a helpless old man, and they had even said that I was beaten by the police. You should have looked at people's faces searching my body for bruises!"

Oscar León

The pressure from the State Security was an obstacle in the League's path during those years. They were afraid of Alejandro's strong leadership. Whenever we had visitors to the church, the MININT sent their officials and Alejandro confronted them. "Why? He is a friend of mine."

"Because he said this and that about Cuba back in his country..."

"He might have said those things there, but not here."

He received constant threats about making him disappear, sending him to prison and having his belongings confiscated. He had to get into the habit of never going out alone. People experienced those things but they could never report anything to the police, otherwise they could automatically be tagged counterrevolutionary. People who are closer to the family know these anecdotes very well. Amid the situation, he remained faithful to his Call.

Another great difficulty that Alejandro's pastorate faced was related to finances. This Church was poor and he had way too big projects. God opened different doors to him, one at a time. The first means of transportation that he had for travelling in Havana was a motorcycle; I can't tell whether it was a Riga or a Carpati. I gave it to him, I put it under his name and he brought it here. And he would take Álda—who was pregnant with Noel—on a ride all over Havana. I found out about that and told him: "I regret giving you that motorcycle! You are going to kill yourself and your family!" But God always protected him because he had big plans for him.

Pablo Mejías

I left the navy in 1987, and returned to church two years later. My marriage was broken, I was going through a sudden financial change (I went from dealing with thousands of pesos at the Navy to getting a humble job as a mechanics teacher), and I was under such stress that it had begun to affect my health. My mother started taking me to the League, and I noticed that the dynamics of the church was completely different from what it was in the 70s. The temple was crowded! It was a full! "Something's going on!"—I told myself.

One day, they projected a film on the former terrace roof: The public life of

Jesus. They projected it on a white sheet. I saw it from my house and it caught my attention. So, I asked a boy in the neighborhood, who went to the League: “Hey! How can I get that film?”

“They rent the tapes there,—he replied—“but you have to be a church member.”

I managed to get a video player (Beta), talked to Ale and he lent me the movie. Watching that movie ministered me, and put me closer to the right Path. That was a time when many Christian leaders in Cuba believed that television was the “box of the devil”. Ale, who was already working at Vida Plena Ministry, proved that all media (whether TV or audio equipment) could be used to spread the Salvation Message. One day, in the late 1980s, I was truly depressed. Then, I saw Nieto on his way to the grocery store to get some milk, and asked him to come inside my house and pray for me. He told me to drop by the League so I could talk to Ale as well. So, I did. I met Alejandro who, in spite of his youth (he was the youngest pastor in the denomination’s history) had a powerful spiritual authority. “If you believe in God, you can do the miracle! Accept Jesus as your Savior! Come back to this church where you have always belonged to!” And so, he prayed. Fifteen days later, I was discharged from La Covadonga.¹²²

¹²² An important hospital center in El Cerro.

ÁLIDA II

My mother knows this Island from end to end because of her work, and wherever she is, she searches for a church because of her faith. Whenever she meets a believer, she must ask what church (s)he goes to. It seems like an ice breaker question. “What church do you belong to, sister?”

“I belong to the Evangelical League.”

That introduction is more than enough for people to make exclamations. My mother has witnessed the gratitude and admiration to Alejandro Nieto in Bayamo, Santiago and other places far from the capital city. He served the Cuban Church with Álda, specially during those years when the sky seemed to be of a bronze color.

Yoe Suárez: Your vision of Cuba for Christ is a key element in your pastorate...

Álda León: We received that vision from God in 1984. It was born out of our passion for this country, for winning all Cubans, for Salvation, for everyone to repent and come to equip the Body of Christ to do a better job. Vida Plena Ministry was founded on that vision. That is, we were never going to get to the people of Cuba from here. Every pastor had to do it from his position, from his place, from his town, from the area he belonged to. Vida Plena’s aim was to provide pastors with the vision of winning the people around them for Christ, and also to provide them with the tools they needed to do their work regardless of their denomination, province or anything else. Most pastors were adults back then; many of them were in their retirement age because they belonged to the generation that remained in the island after the Triumph of the Revolution. Ale and I stood out among them because we were twenty and so years old. Honestly, I believe that we succeeded because God had given us the grace. We arrived in the provinces without references; we didn’t even have a pastor’s directory. We went out and relied on our faith.

The Baptist’s, Methodist’s, Pentecostal’s and all believer’s vision should be the Greatest Commission, Christ’s instructions for us: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of people of all the nations”. That was our vision and that’s why we

supported everyone who followed His instructions. If a Baptist pastor was trying to reach people, and was creating new missions and winning many believers over, we said: “he is winning Cuba for Christ. He is there, and he is doing it. What can I do, but support him?” Many people approached us willing to join us, but we always replied: “No, you work with your church”. We never asked what happened in their churches, nor requested inside information from their churches. We simply wanted to know how their denomination was going, we wanted to listen to their testimony; we rejoiced at the Lord’s harvest. When we received that vision from God, we made a pact with the Lord and said to Him: “we will take then ten percent of what you give us, and share the remaining 90 percent with others”. By “everything” we meant, for instance, that if someone gave us Bibles—there were almost no Bibles back then—or anything else that was useful to the pastors’ work, we would share. Our intention was never to win people for ourselves, we never let anyone join us and work with us, we didn’t “steal” people from churches either; we were just there to support others.

Someone who lived in the mountains or in a forgotten town, could receive tools such as video tapes or any other material as an aid to develop his/her evangelical work or train leaders.

Yoe Suárez: Did anyone misunderstand your vision?

Álida León: Perhaps. But I believe that we made ourselves clear when we said that the Cuba for Christ vision had nothing to do with politics, but with spiritual matters. The sign with the words Cuba for Christ was hanged on the temple for the first time in 1994, and it has remained there ever since.

Yoe Suárez: How did you travel throughout Cuba?

Álida León: We first drove a Lada which we had bought in 1984; Noel, our first son, was four months old when the State began to sell cars to the Church, and so we could buy one.

Bishop Arnaldo Rodríguez, who was a Methodist back then and was very fond of Alejandro, called us one day: “There’s a car for sale at the Panama embassy.” The car had been crashed on one occasion but it had been repaired; we didn’t have the means to buy it and he lent us the money. Ale had never driven a car before. He had only ridden a motorcycle that my father had given him as a present. One day he got his driving license and asked me: “Do you dare joining me?”

“Of course!”—I replied, and we started traveling.

Sometimes we would arrive at a small town very late at night and we would

sleep in the car, which we’d pull over at the central park; the following morning we would ask people where the church was.

Yoe Suárez: What stories do you recall from those years? The things you did moved people deeply.

Álida León: We knew some pastors who only had one pair of trousers back then; so, whenever their wives needed to wash them, they had to remain in their room until their clothes were dried and they could wear them again. About the Bibles, we watched many people cry for one of them. That was overwhelming. But God always provided the means for us to reach the people in need.

Who is there like you,
 A people enjoying salvation in Jehovah,
 Your protective shield
 And your majestic sword?
 Your enemies will cringe before you, And you will tread on their backs.
 Deuteronomy 33:29

In 1993, the American journalist J. Lee Grady arrived in Havana. He was interested in knowing the situation of Cuban churches first-hand. Rumors had it that the State and the Church were easing the tensions, that there was a revival, and he, as a reporter and believer, wanted to see that for himself. He visited Marianao, Vedado and Cojímar and wrote that “the communists were not interfering in the church’s work, and young people worshipped without the fear of being discriminated against”.¹²³

A Methodist pastor assured him that people in his congregation were not praying because of the revival; they were experiencing the revival. The leader added that there were increasing, dynamic and powerful churchgoers. Despite the obvious economic hardships, Grady met a charismatic church: a dancing and joyful church like no other he had seen in North America. He wondered how such a movement had happened: “When the fire of renewal spread throughout the 70s and 80s, churches began to evangelize despite threats from the government”¹²⁴

According to Grady, the church was harvesting what they had planted: miracle healings; an active membership for whom there were no longer enough temples and houses. “This is what churches from the New Testament must have been like”,¹²⁵ claimed the reporter in amazement, and wrote further ahead: “if churches in Cuba were deteriorating, their leader could easily blame (...) the lack of resources”. Some theorists assert that the last decade of the 20th century was a time of big numbers, spiritual revival and rapprochement between the State and the Church in Cuba. Dr María del Carmen Domínguez has written on the subject:

Churches increased their membership, evangelical churches in particular. Generally speaking, the economic hardship that the

¹²³ J. Lee Grady: *The Holy Spirit is not for sale, Códigos de Vida*, USA, 2010, p. 16.

¹²⁴ J. Lee Grady: op. cit., p. 17.

¹²⁵ Ibidem.

country is going through has resulted in more people visiting temples and church-houses. Many churches have grown, and others have sought alternatives for preserving their worship despite their limited resources.¹²⁶

About the causes for the growth of evangelical churches in the 90s, the sociologist Aurelio Alonso seems to have a clearer idea:

Cuba is simply a religious country. A historically religious country. (...) This means that within its cultural tradition there is a latent religious spirituality, among other things. That reality could not be affected by a temporary conflict, no matter how serious it was. It could not be affected by reductionist policies or by systematic discriminatory actions either. Discrimination—whether it comes from the official philosophy of political powers, or from classist relations or from other religions—cannot wash away deeply rooted religious traditions in the long term.

This is the only explanation to why atheistic education has not permeated the spirituality so as to make religiousness something of the past or turn it into a collectable piece exclusively worthy of a museum.¹²⁷

The 90s were the years when the Socialist bloc collapsed. Cuba was alone. Many people bet that it would not be long before the revolutionary project went down. A severe economic crisis, which the government euphemistically called “Special Period”, began to take place. The government took immediate actions that changed the course of the country; it knew that it would take the efforts of all the people to save Cuba. Historian Arnaldo Silva León recalls that the 4th Congress of the Communist Party was held on October 10, 1991; a resolution to improve the *Órganos del Poder Popular*¹²⁸ was passed.¹²⁹ It led to important reforms aimed at making the Cuban society be more actively involved in the country’s affairs, considering the diversity of opinions. The National Assembly of People’s Power,—Silva León explains—met the following year by virtue

¹²⁶ María del Carmen Domínguez: op. cit., p. 172.

¹²⁷ Aurelio Alonso: Introduction at the conference about Las relaciones entre la Iglesia y el Estado en Cuba a tres años de la visita del Papa Juan Pablo II (Relations between the Church and the State in Cuba three years after Pope John Paul II’s visit), organized by the Washington Office of Latin America (WOLA) at the American University, Washington D.C., May 14, 2001.

¹²⁸ TN: Government structures.

¹²⁹ Arnaldo Silva León: *Breve historia de la Revolución Cubana*, Ciencias Sociales, Havana, 2003, p. 56.

of its constituent functions, and approved a series of changes to the nation’s Constitution in accordance with what they had agreed on at the 4th Congress of the Communist Party”.¹³⁰

In 1992, some parts of the Constitution were rewritten. For instance, the State was declared secular instead of atheistic. There was a noticeable change in the discourse. Perhaps, the most important of all transformations for believers was the admittance to the Communist Party. “This way—Silva León assures in a triumphal statement—they were ending all sorts of discrimination based on religion”; although a great part of the evangelical Cuban church had no interest in joining the party. A historical meeting between Fidel and 74 members of the Ecumenical Council of Cuba and Evangelical denominations had taken place at the Council of State on April 2, 1990. They discussed the concerns of the Christian people, and according to witnesses, the government was receptive. The meeting was filmed and entirely broadcasted on national television. This entailed an abrupt change in the Church-State relations and dismantled the twenty-year old postulate that the State would not encourage, support or help any religious group, or ask anything from them. There were no doubts that major steps with a favorable impact on the evangelical work in the Island had been taken. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, people tend to look at the 1990s with romantic eyes. Still, there are plenty of experiences.

Oscar León

A few years back, I handed over my church, the Central de Pinar del Río church. I arrived in the town 21 years ago: there was just one temple and one mission in the whole province. I am leaving fifty organized churches now. In the last report we submitted to the Associations Registry, the number of members we reported, completely surprised me: four thousand members. (Excluding those who attend service sporadically, which would double that number). The provincial Government is aware that our church holds the largest membership. I was given a certificate for “My missionary work” at a party meeting. Which is very funny for two reasons: on the one hand, they severely repressed me at the beginning; and on the other, it is such a thoughtful detail from them; I had never received any acknowledgment in my own church. Life has funny ways! When a reporter interviews someone nowadays, let’s say, a baseball player, it’s usual to hear him say things such as “God willing” or “thank God”. You wouldn’t hear anyone talk like that before; such language was forbidden. They would erase the

¹³⁰ Arnaldo Silva León: op. cit., p. 57.

interview and it was never published; not to mention that they would warn you not to say God's name during the interview. That word was banned from the Cuban vocabulary. Now things are different. Maybe younger people don't realize that there has been a change, but I do. It is a change that started in the 90s.

Some churches were in a predicament when their membership increased, because the space they had was not big enough to hold so many people. That's when the church-house idea came up. In this respect, Dr Felipe Carneado—representative of Religious Affairs in the Central Committee of the Communist Party—was fundamental. He suggested that we gathered at homes to pray and share the Word, the same way the first Christians had done according to the Bible. Carneado was a mature man, an established communist; but he had a long-term vision and realized that the State should not underestimate its ties to the Church. He played a fundamental role as a mediator between his many comrades who looked at religion as if it was the opium of the masses, something worthy of washing away, and religious institutions that were suspicious of everything that came from the government. However, there's still lack of understanding towards believers today.

People need to clean up their systems. Some get that poison out of their system sooner than others. For as long as I pastored in Pinar del Río, the man in charge of the ideological branch in the Party struggled with his comrades not to look at the church with disdain. I remember a notorious case in the 90s: a dean at the University of Pinar del Río wanted a professor out his Faculty just because she was a Christian. There are still those who have become fossilized not wanting to accept a Child of God to work where they are working. As stated by communist leaders, the finest employees in Cuba today are Christian.

A leader from Bayamo told me so personally. There are also legal issues: according to this nation's Constitution, citizens have freedom of worship. However, members of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior are not allowed to profess their Christian faith. I even had the case of a lady who worked as a civilian in the army. She suffered with her nerves and all treatments were unhelpful. She went to the church where I pastored, and we prayed, and casted out her demons and she's completely healthy today. When she got back to work and people found out that she had converted, they called her and made her choose: you work here or you go to church. I met a guy in Consolación who converted. He was a cop, and when his unit found out that he had converted, he was pressured to abandon his faith. God willing, I will see that all obstacles

for that crowd of military men in my country are swept away before he takes me with him. I am not saying that they *should* go to church; I am saying that they should *have the freedom* to go to church.

TWENTY-TWO

Cuba had to reinvent itself in the 90s in order to survive. 1994 was the year of improvised rafts crossing the Malecón and heading to Florida; it was the year of broken glasses and riots in Havana; it was the year of extreme scarcity. A new League emerged from those years; a League that suffered but didn't stand still or become afflicted by those times. The church started to celebrate its anniversaries for the first time in September, 1994. The Biblical Institute (English for IBLEC) was created in July, 1994 and it was aimed at preparing members of the denomination on the doctrines. We can see some important results coming out of the more than two decades of Christian education; including a list of thousands of graduates and nearly 100 schools that are part of the institute and are distributed in the 14 out of the 15 presbyteries of the denomination. The 90s were the perfect moment for the LEC's missionary expansion; an expansion that had begun at the end of the previous decade. All this led the board to reorganize their structure and roles. According to the League's New Statutes Project:

In accordance with the new visions, objectives and renewing strategies, (...) our church experienced a major growth at all levels which made us set new guidelines as well as work, attention and assistance areas. This is why Departments and local Ministries were organized and established (...) in the 90s. Because of the hard times our country was living in, we thought it necessary initiate a project to plant Churches and Missions. This project has been growing, developing, and maturing according to the times and the possibilities that we have been given.¹³¹

These changes experienced by the denomination had long term effects, such as the rewriting of the Church Regulations which were to be approved in 2008. The board of directors thought it appropriate to warn about the need to write, approve and promote a new Constitution that was in keeping with the new situation of the church. In the words of the writers of the new Constitution, "the

¹³¹ *New Statutes Project*, IBLEC, Havana, 2008.

existing Regulations were obsolete in the sense that most articles were no longer in line with new practices".¹³² The new draft—unanimously approved in November, 2008, by the Extended National Board¹³³—deals with issues related to the LEC's restructuring based on the changes in the 90s, such as the structuring into presbyteries and the creation of the IBLEC, etc. Some other aspects like the length of presidential terms and other positions within the denomination were modified: from two to five years (they are elected by the board of directors as it's been since the 50s). This was one of the last and most important changes in the early 20th century promoted by Nieto Selles' pastorate.

¹³² *Ibidem*.

¹³³ As per the church regulations in force: Article 46: The JNA (Spanish for Extended National Board), is the higher national institution to reach agreements, provide instructions with binding force and take decisions that affect the Institution as a whole. Article 47: It includes the National Board of Directors and the Denomination's Presbyterial Body, and it is presided by the President of the National Board of Directors. Article 48: It shall hold ordinary meetings every three to four months a year, or it shall hold extraordinary meetings as needed to discuss highly important matters. Article 49: At least 80 percent of its members are required to be present for the meeting to take place. A quorum of half of the members plus one is required to take decisions.

ÁLIDA III

The international community of believers has effective support networks apart from government mechanisms. Álida is well aware of this, and she is also aware of the epic nature of a battle in the fields of faith in an island that's adrift. The whole country shuddered to the core in 1990. People lost their bearings; the ocean was there again: as a wall and a bridge. It had to be announced: Christ is the answer. Then, actions had to be taken. Faith without actions is dead. To act in a dead country is faith.

Yoe Suárez: Let's start from the end: when did you and Alejandro take your last trip?

Álida León: Ale was always the leader; even though there were other people who joined the voyage, he was always there. His last trip was in January, 2006, before he got a surgery. We had a Mercedes Benz, which was more comfortable, and we took Ariel, our second son, with us all the way to Guantánamo. Ale was in pain that time.

Yoe Suárez: When the economic crisis began in the 90s, Vida Plena continued working across the country. How did you manage to receive things and distribute them later?

Álida León: Things arrived in the country by faith, because we, as a Cuban church, did not have maternal connections abroad. People arriving in the country had heard of us one way or another, because the Lord had made us grow. We began to expand in 1990. Everyone in Cuba and abroad knew Ale because of the spiritual revival among the youth in the 80s I told you about. Many brothers and sisters from abroad dropped by and there was always someone who blessed us. Actually, most support came from the Mexican church at that time. Many people came from the Lower California area. An important church back then was the Centro Cristiano Calacoaya where the deceased pastor, Gonzalo Vega, and his wife, Vivian, were. Groups of tourists came from that church, and they always left something. Many business men and small-business owners belonged to that

church and they would always bring resources to support our pastors. Many others joined those groups; they never returned here, but they fulfilled their objective in that historical moment. God guided us into developing some administrative skills because we had said that ten percent of what we received was for the League, but the remaining 90 percent had to be equally shared with others.

Yoe Suárez: You were saying that the League began expanding in the 90s...

Álida León: Yes, we only had one church because we could not afford to expand. Our resources were not enough to improve our own infrastructure; we didn't even have restrooms for our brothers and sisters who attended service. We started to build later on, and we began winning people in a spiritual way, and we trained them. Alejandro opened study and training courses for leaders. Those courses would never end. I mean, the objective was not to limit the teaching of those courses to three months or one year, but to teach all what Alejandro received from God every year. In 1990, it had been ten years since we started these courses; we had people working with us, and decided that the time had come to plant the first church, a child of the League in San José de las Lajas. That was in 1992.

That's when we began to invest. We repaired the premises owned by Biblia Abierta church; the government had just given the church back to them after seizing their property in the 60s, because no one was allowed to have two properties. The president of the denomination at the time, had another church with a pastor and he agreed that we used the premises. From that moment, we began founding missions in the eastern part of the island. Nieto and Ester moved to Chaparra in the early 90s and remained there for a while. They were both old enough when they started preaching and winning souls. They began planting a church at the house of a brother of Ester's who had had a high rank in the Party. His name was Antonio Selles. The man had a motorcycle and evangelized some parts of the province.

Yoe Suárez: What about the expansion in Havana?

Álida León: We began to expand in Havana in the 2000s. But we had created the missionary structure of the territories and districts back in the 90s.

Yoe Suárez: We could say that the church became a missionary church with Alejandro Jr. Is it correct?

Álida León: Yes, absolutely! It was Alejandro who started it all.

Yoe Suárez: And more specifically, the missionary church began with the Cuba for Christ vision.

Álida León: God gave us that vision two years after we started our pastorate; so, we had to stop our Biblical Study Worship because the place was crowded, there were people standing everywhere; that's when we began creating new worship centers at people's homes. This was another way of spreading our missionary work. We call them Prayer cells, formerly known as Home Groups. Alejandro wrote a book with instructions on how to create them. We had many detractors because those cells were as crowded as the churches; so, the authorities had some of them close down. We knew that we could plant many other churches. There were also rumors about how people thought that there were going to be divisions within the church because everyone could teach what they wanted at home. But Alejandro instructed the leaders who were going to teach at home, and this is how we made sure that the message was spread and the doctrine was kept. The League began to grow and the number of converted people increased, services were crowded; we couldn't cope with all the work since the end of the 80s as there was a huge harvest.

Yoe Suárez: But I imagine that neither you nor the rest of the leaders were prepared for that moment.

Álida León: The revival of the 80s is long gone. There's nothing left of it in Cuba. It's a shame. I come from a traditional church and this I can assure you: the words "leader" and "ministry" did not exist. A pastor and a few deacons were the ones in charge. The Cuban church was not ready to welcome so many congregants into worships; people that came so others prayed for them. There was a long line of people waiting outside for a miracle to happen, waiting to be healed and welcome Christ into their lives. But we did not create a proper structure, and so, we lost that harvest. After that experience, we realized that we needed to train leaders, to instruct people to do our work and pass some of our responsibilities on to someone else. We could not do it all on our own.

Yoe Suárez: In 1994, the Biblical Institute of the Evangelical League of Cuba (IBLEC) was created. I believe that it was an expression of that new conception, right?

Álida León: Yes, it met that need.

The IBLEC was created here, and its structure was different from today's. Basic Doctrine was taught from the beginning. People began to study and better themselves, and Basic Doctrines was a requirement to becoming a leader, etc.

Yoe Suárez: That impacted favorably on the expansion in the 2000's; the LEC even planted churches abroad.

Álida León: Yes, it was a good foundation.

We spread throughout some corners of the island with time. We sent pastor Carlos Melia and his wife to Pinar del Río; we moved missionaries to Los Palacios and, then, expanded to Las Tunas, Guantánamo, Moa, Holguín. We could not get to all provinces because, in accordance with the legislation in force, the LEC didn't have any temple outside the capital city before 1959. In order for us to plant a church outside Havana, we had to talk to the authorities of the place to legalize our status there.

Yoe Suárez: Considering the things you've said so far, I believe that the League owes several denominations in Cuba a debt of gratitude and good relations.

Álida León: We had very good relations with pastors, leaders, and supported all denominations. We were always respectful and cautious; for instance, when we were going to bless a church, we let the president know that we had the support of this ministry. That is, we never went behind his back.

Yoe Suárez: The LEC sent representatives to some important Cuban evangelical spaces such as the Comisión Bíblica (Biblical Commission). Right?

Álida León: Although we have never been a part of the Cuban Council of Churches, Alejandro was a member of the Commission. He was passionate about the Bible, so he was proposed to become one of its members and he accepted.

Yoe Suárez: But he joined them as a representative of the churches that were not part of the Council. Is that right?

Álida León: Exactly. Since we had plenty of connections back then, it was easier to get them to talk to José López—the man in charge of the institution back then—directly. He was part of the Commission for several years, until 2000. Ale was an active promoter of Bibles in Cuba as well as of other things from God.

TWENTY-FOUR

Pablo Mejías

Nieto got me a Bible. Ale dedicated it to me; I still have it. I lived in Cienfuegos with my wife and he encouraged me to get baptized. I had attended every other Sunday service, and I was impressed by the dozens and dozens of people in white robes; it was a time of revival. I started taking lessons at a Baptist church where I belonged for a little while, but as soon as I received the end-of-course certificate I came and baptized here. I began teaching the Bible at home around 1990, it was a sort of prayer cell. Ale followed my every step. He gave me a LEC's local worker credential, so I could preach in other churches. I was an official pastor of the denomination in 1992, and had a missionary work in Trinidad. He started telling me about his project of expanding the denomination across the entire country by means of church-houses; that's when I realized that things were truly changing for the League.

How did the League adapt to the new and complex situation of the 90s? Something apparently as simple as worship schedule was modified to allow people to gather without difficulties. Saturday service was removed; there were too many people on the streets and the transportation was more difficult. Worship was done by Departments on Fridays. Worship of Prayer would be done on Tuesdays; Biblical Studies on Thursdays; Youth Worship—although all church would participate—on Saturdays; and Sunday School on Sundays, from nine to eleven in the morning, and general Worship, from eight to ten in the evening. We realized that many people were willing to come to church but they remained at bus stops because there were no buses to get here. The transportation issue caused people to start attending Cells instead of Districts and Territories. The IBLEC (the Biblical Institute of the Evangelical League of Cuba) emerged in 1994 to instruct the mass of new members coming every day in the Sound Doctrine.

Gloria Jorge

People were eager to listen to the gospel. Many Cuban and foreign leaders came to preach and minister. Both Alejandro and Árida have been extraordinary pastors. They contributed to the growth of the League, and to make the League what it is today.

Oscar León

He wanted to buy a printing press, and expand the church because it was small. He didn't actually think of staying in this temple. Ever since the 80s he suggested that government institutions traded a cinema or a theater for the temple, because he was aware the church growth. But the government did not accept his offer, and so he looked for some architects who checked the building's foundations; they were really sturdy and so they proceeded with the repairs. With the help of Ale's friends, this church changed its appearance.

Pablo Mejías

Ale began to pastor in 1982. But he had served as Evangelist before. He had good relations with many Evangelists. Orson Vila—who visited our church since the times of Nieto Campos—was one of those leaders he made good friends with. He performed miracles during his visit to the LEC. My mom has an incredible testimony about him...

Gloria Jorge

Perhaps due to his military education, my husband was a stubborn man who didn't allow me to come to church sometimes. Luckily, we lived across the church, so I could hear service if I just sat on the terrace. I could no hear very well; I had hearing difficulties and had to undergo surgery. Orson was running a health campaign. I "declared a miracle" in my eardrums and I went to bed. The following day I woke up with unbearable pain. I went to the hospital, but the ENT specialist was not on call that day. I was given an injection for pain relief and I was sent home. I laid down in bed and prayed until I felt that my inner ear had burst. When I saw the doctor, who was supposed to operate on me, she was stunned. I didn't need surgery anymore

Pablo Mejías

Whenever Orson Vila came to the League, the entire 45thstreet across the church would be crowded. He set up loudspeakers outside the church. The temple couldn't hold that many people. He was the standard bearer of miracles in Cuba, (Alejandro himself had the Baptism of the Holy Spirit at the end of the 70s during a campaign led by Orson at the LEC). In the 1980s, Ale invited Freddy

—the warlock—to give his testimony and minister about what God had done in his life. I still have the tapes in which they both talk about it.

Alejandro Laredo

Alejandro was a servant of God, interested in winning lives for Christ. He was strong of character. You could never speak to him about doing business for profits; he was only interested in winning souls. He would invest everything to achieve his purpose. He even bought houses to turn them into churches. And he was confident that God was going to continue providing him; he did not care much about that kind of thing. He influenced people in Cuba and abroad. Important International Christian leaders come to this country today, only because they met Alejandro. Juan Vereecken, for instance; he said that he was going to continue visiting the island as long as Alejandro and his family were here.

Oscar León

Ale created a ministry of material support for pastors. During the harsh Special Period, the old Volkswagen van travelled throughout the entire country and delivered money and resources; it was a way of relieving the economic pressure of leaders and their congregations. Thanks to the support of Mexican churches (which were affected by the fall in the Mexican peso), for a long time the League would give brothers and sisters 10 or 15 dollars every month, regardless of the denomination they belonged to. Today, there are some Ministries like that one. But, make no mistake: it was Alejandro who was a pioneer in putting this into practice; he did it in an organized way, in a serious way, so that people could count one hundred percent on his support. One time, he helped more than 130 members of my church (excluding leaders) who lived in poverty. I joined him in one of his trips. I remember a pastor who fell on his knees when he saw Alejandro at his door, and thanked God for answering his desperate prayers. We got as far as Baracoa, on the other end of the island. We stopped at a leader's home. We were welcomed with great joy. Alejandro looked for something inside his car and came back to us. Finally, he held out his hand to him and gave him a pair of glasses that the man had been expecting for several months.

Alejandro Laredo

One of the lessons I learned from Ale was to trust people, even though they did not seem to have the conditions at first glance. Another lesson was his willingness to serve; people who serve become the greatest leaders. He would easily pardon people. Every time you failed, he was there to lend his hand to you. People may criticize that, but it was inherent in his character. If you needed

support in your projects related to God, he was there for you. You have no idea of how many churches he helped to found; a great part of them did not belong to the League. There was a time when Alejandro lent his helping hand to nearly all pastors in Cuba. He was a luxury spiritual adviser; and he made his every effort to help other leaders to have an economic stability for their own peace of mind, so they could focus on their Ministries. Alejandro went through tough experiences with his dad. When he arrived at this church, he had moved from town to town 22 times. He lived an "itinerant" kind of life; he had no roots, and no money. Whenever he travelled abroad and someone asked him how (s) he could help the Cuban church, he told him/her about his projects to support the pastors. He continued to joining forces until he was in a position to travel throughout the island and give away 10, 15, 20 CUC to everyone who needed them. I even heard at certain denominations such as the Nazarene—where I belonged for a short time—that Alejandro wrote down a list of the most needed pastors to visit them and bless them. There were projects to support pastors, and Ale promoted them among the different denominations. I myself was part of one of those projects while I was working at the Nazarene Seminary. Sometimes Methodists, Pentecostals and Baptists think that's everyone for themselves; but the LEC's ultimate idea was to unite all Christians. This is how he worked: he asked the president of each denomination a list of the leaders who lived in harsh conditions, and he sent them money, and books on a monthly basis, or asked them to drop by the church. That project lives up to this day, but in a different way. The Bibles that the country receive are distributed by the Cuban Council of Churches, for instance. Some denominations sell them; we give them to our newly baptized members. But we buy them with money from funds of our own. When I was an administrator, I picked them up myself, and the invoices were for 14 to 22 thousand pesos. We never ran up a debt with the Council. Besides, our financial records are there: most of our income come from tithes and offerings. Today, our church has a bigger membership, of course.

Olga Lidia

I graduated in Accounting and Finances from the University of Havana in 1987. I passed my Social Service program like everyone else did, but I could never be promoted to cuadro because I was a Christian. I was the Head of the Economics Department at Frank País Hospital; but my salary was way below that position, and I my contract was of a different kind. I was filling the position of a Chief Specialist, even though my duties were those of someone in a management

position. I left the hospital and started to work at Vida Plena in 1993. Ale had created it a while ago, in 1985 or 1986, and he had no one working with him. Vida Plena was Ale, Árida and the boys. The first secretary Vida Plena had was Estercita, his sister; she was also the church secretary. That Ministry had the objective to share ninety percent of everything arriving at the church with other denominations in Cuba. The League only kept the remaining ten percent. Alejandro worked to unite the Cuban Church. Computers were just beginning to arrive in the country, and I knew how to use them. This is why Alejandro asked me to join him in Vida Plena in 1993. He wanted to digitize everything, and I began to input all documents and data into a PC with a black and white screen.

We had loads of work with Ale, he was very demanding; I am in charge of Vida Plena now, and I tell my employees that they have it easy with me as compared to what I had to do during Ale's time. When I started working at the Ministry, there were three other people who received their salaries. The League did not have many employees, their budget was not enough to hire more staff. I believe there wasn't even a doorman at the entrance; and women in the church took shifts to keep the place clean.

Pablo Mejías

Alejandro was always on the road, travelling throughout Cuba. His purpose was to unite and supervise this fast-growing denomination; he had to do so by dealing with the great distance that separated churches. Pastors met every three months; but the more our denominations grew the more sporadic our meetings were. It was very hard for us to meet and left our missions alone for a few days. Ale would invite one his many friends from abroad to those annual meetings, so they could minister us, give us lectures and prepare us. They came from Canada, Australia, Brazil, Puerto Rico; and what's most interesting: they belonged to different denominations. Cuban authorities were always suspicious whenever someone related to foreigners. Ale took some measures to protect his testimony and even his own life. He confessed to me that, that was the reason why he never went out on the streets by himself.

AS LONG AS IT ISN'T SO...

Lord's Supper

Friday, April/28/1995

Evangelical League of Cuba

Pastor Alejandro Nieto Selles (excerpt)¹³⁴

Everything that we sing and everything that we say here is being recorded supposedly by the State Security. A lieutenant colonel, a captain and someone else—whose rank I don't recall very well—let me know that last Friday's meeting on the church's rooftop (a private meeting—private!—to discuss internal issues of the denomination, churches and pastors), even that meeting, was recorded. We do not speak of anything else in our meetings but the Lord's Word; but our privacy is being interfered with. I am being taped; I don't know where the microphones are, if they are here or at the house across the street, we don't know how they do it, and, honestly, we don't care whether they tape our conversations or not. But the church has been told that (and I do want this on tape, just in case someone misinterpret my words, I can repeat them through the recording) ... because every time I am summoned to the police station, they say a bunch of nonsense that have never been spoken at this church before. It seems that they record our conversations and then take notes about it (I don't know what is their mechanism), and write things that aren't quite true. Therefore, we will take the precaution of recording our own private meetings. If there's any suspicion about us, then, we will compare recordings. I have kept silence for years, but we want to tell you that, according to their judgment and assessment on our church (that are being published everywhere and are being shared with other denominations) claim that we are a counterrevolutionary church. [SILENCE]

I do not accept this. They also claim that people come to our church because of the soap bars and stuff they receive from us; that we are buying those people, those honest people; that we are playing with the people's need. They are saying these words over and over again. Some of you, leaders of church-houses, will

¹³⁴ Transcript (edited by the author) of the original audio file, courtesy of the pastoral family.

be probably visited by some officials or be summoned to their office so they can make you the proposal of becoming secret agents (the same job offer received by members of this church) ... We understand that as total disrespect for our church. (...)

And they are making that proposal to pastors and leaders of our church here and in other provinces. They have been asked to report any foreigner that come to visit us, what they do here, how much money they give us and how that money is being used. Our church will hold on to our values as usual: we will continue to respecting everyone's ideas, trying not to hurt anyone's feelings; respecting the freedom of thought and judgement that God has given everyone when He gave them a head and a personality of their own. We respect everyone's ideas. This shall not be an obstacle to becoming a member of our church if someone has truly received Christ as his/her Savior, if (s)he has giving his/her life to Christ and has recognized that there is no other way to Salvation but Christ. Make no mistake: no man can save; only Christ saves. In view of what I just said—which are just a few of the minor events that have occurred—, we ask church members, once more, not to make political comments of any kind, not here, not in any church-house. You should come to church to pray, you should come to church to pray to God for your nation, to ask Christ to save it. Other denominations have been told that the sign that reads “Cuba for Christ”—which is not only in our premises—is a counterrevolutionary slogan. Also, my brothers and sisters, I have been under investigation for the past 11 years, because I was allegedly recruited by the CIA 11 years ago.

Another thing that they say is that dollars pour into this church. And these are not rumors; we and other denominations have been told such things personally. Our leaders—who have been threatened because of their church-houses—have been told that both the church and I receive millions of dollars to destabilize the Revolution. I don't know how! We wrote a letter a few days ago, because three of our pastors were being harassed and threatened; and because students were being told at their schools—particularly at those in the eastern part of the country, in Las Tunas region—that they could not attend worship at the Evangelical League of Cuba because it was a counterrevolutionary service, and that anyone who went near a worship center would be expelled from school or fired at work. We sent this letter to the Central Committee, and stated all the things that had happened. The letter was signed by the three pastors—who testify to the things that were said to them, the way in which they were offended,

and stated the facts. The State Security called me, then; they said the letter was an insult to them, and that I was just complaining. (...)

That's how they perceive everything we do, and that's why we ought to inform you. Our intention is not to provoke a negative reaction on you, but to make you understand how careful and how strong our Christianity and our authentic Christian faith must be. You must polish the word Christian until it shines. The meaning of the word should not be blurred. I want to let you know that they did not approve any [church-house] that we present to them nor they approved our new proposals of church-houses (the ones that we have on papers). We are struggling with the authorities to make them understand that these houses cannot be declared illegal places. They will most probably visit each house along with the People's Power institution and the Party—which is involved in all this, to do a “joint” work with them—to shut them down and declare them illegal. They have threatened some of our brothers to take them to court, to fine them one thousand pesos. Some of our pastors have been threatened with jail. I have been threatened with jail, because I've been allegedly accused of assuming the right of telling believers that we should continue our services in church-houses, because that's the only way of legalizing them. If you shut them down, you are eliminating them. As long as they remain open, we have a chance. The ones we close will not open again. We are living through troubled times. And this matter does not concern solely our church. I was speaking to brother Orson Vila, who called me today to insist on giving us his support and ask for our support in return. His house as well as the eighty-nine church-houses in Camagüey have been declared illegal. He was ordered to close them and he was threatened with fines and jail. Our brother told me that he was held in custody all day yesterday, from morning to 5pm. So, we are not playing games here. I don't mean to create an insurrection, but we should not rest on our laurels. All pastors met a month ago. We gathered because of the meeting at the Ministry of Justice where I did not accept their refusal to church-houses. Because all of them are children of a legal church and they are all part of our work, and they all belong to believers who are official members of a denomination that didn't appear out of nowhere. It is a denomination that existed before the Revolution; a denomination that has stood along the thirty-and-so years of Revolution without a single negative testimonial; a denomination that has complied with the rules and limitations. We do not have a “tradition”. I am confident that God will put His hand on this, for this matter concerns the entire country and the entire religious community. There

are over one hundred evangelical temples in Havana alone; and up to the day of the interview, they had only approved seven church-houses. They had not even approved one per temple. They seem to be mocking at us; the temples are small and we've been asking for bigger premises for more than seven years now. I said at the pastors' meeting, among other things, that it is our duty—as written in John 10—to surrender our lives in behalf of our sheep; that we have to remain with our flock and be faithful to our Lord and to our denomination whether under any threat, or in prison or any other ruling. My words were interpreted as if they were encouraging hatred for the Revolution.

The non-converts do not see it this way, but each and every one of you is a sheep and we are responsible for you. When the wolf snatches one sheep—it does not snatch ninety-nine because its mouth it's too small—the pastor stands up, goes after the wolf and kills it—it's written in the Bible—and retrieves the missing sheep. I am confident that God will put His hand so all these mediators who are misinterpreting the church's ideals, its life, its will to grow, its needs and revival will receive the Spirit of Wisdom, and understand what they have not understood so far. The truth is that every church movement is being interpreted as a political movement. And we, my brothers and sisters, cannot allow that to happen. The church is not against the Government. The church was called to fill the Earth; and look how many governments there are on the Earth. The church has to live under governments such as those in South Africa, China, Albania, the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, Argentina. One administration replaces another and the church has to remain faithful to same its ideals. (...)

No one can set the church apart from its path. Today, the church must live according to what Christ taught among the four walls of a room at the top of a building. We are not making any changes. Woe betide anyone who dares misinterpret his words! The Lord's church is designed to preach a gospel that saves the soul, and put Man and God in a correct relationship. And we were ordered to preach to everybody. It means that no one is excluded. It means that when God said "every creature", He knew that all creatures were not going to think alike, that they were not going to share the same social, political, economic and religious ideals. (...)

Every man in Cuba—from the tallest to the smallest one—needs Jesus Christ. And we ought to give every person, our eternal love, the love of God; we ought to love every person, even those who misinterpret our words, regardless of our difference of opinion.

There is no way that I, who preach about love and cannot hate a single person, preach an entire country about hatred. That won't be me, nor any servant of God in this country. As for me, as long as I live and pastor here, this church will be neither involve in Man's politics nor it will be part of the right wing...

[Drumroll. People applaud for one minute.] On the other hand, brothers and sisters, I would appreciate if we did not started rumors about this. Let us not turn this into the headline of the day. May Jehovah bring you peace...

Many pastors call me, write me, come to see me and tell me: we know that you've been put to the test, brother, and we are praying for your church. I only pray to God for one thing, and that is, that you always have faith. Honestly, my brothers and sisters, sometimes I have wished to die before living in prejudice of my faith. I have promised myself that, as long as I preach, I will never preach rubbish, nor I will stop taking the gospel serious. Perhaps, you understand now why I preach for one hour or two, as if the temple were going to end any minute now, as if I had no other chance to share the Word. Because I have been even threatened to death. The only thing I want to teach you is that you love the Lord and that your faith comes from your heart. Anything else is vanity. The one who does my Father' will—Jesus said—will remain forever. (...)

If anything happened to me these days, I wish the Lord help whoever takes my place here to preach the same gospel I have been preaching. Until then and as long as we are here, let's search the face of God as if it were the most valuable thing on Earth. Get up and pray at night! Search for the Lord during the day! Read the Gospel! Pray for your nation! Pray for the leaders of this nation! May God give wisdom to those that are in authority, and may He give His people the courage to live Jesus Christ's faith.

To tell in silence

He had been there for a few hours. Naked walls...a room nearly as empty as almost all offices at the Ministry of the Interior. The Reverend had been summoned to talk. "We're just going to talk", so he was told when he was kindly picked up by a police van at his house. The sound of typewriters in the distance kept him company. Time was passing by and his empty stomach was well aware of it. Two uniformed men came into the office and put an end to the long silence; he could not imagine the long time he was going to spend there talking: "Am I under arrest?"—he asked them point-blank.

"No! No! You are not under arrest,"—the policemen replied, alarmingly.

"Look, let's have some lunch,"—one of the officers added quickly, as if trying to calm down a storm. "Thank you, but I don't want to."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I always have lunch with my wife; she must be waiting for me."

"Let's eat something and we'll talk later."

"You bring me here, but I cannot go when I decide to do so, but when you allow me to...Then, I am under arrest." "The thing is, Reverend,"—the colonel interrupted—"that you are taking pastors to preach at your church."

The captain began to unfold a shorthand document. He mentioned two, three, four names:

"All of them are foreigners, and not only have they used the pulpit but some of them have stayed overnight..."

The pastor leaned forward and, looking over his glasses, examined the list that the officer had brought closer to him. He nodded in silence, and smiled. He looked at the uniformed men and laughed quietly while shaking his head. "But they are not foreigners!"—the Reverend said—"Those are my brothers from Mexico, from Chile, from Canada..."

"So, they are your brothers, huh?"

"Of course! When Communist Party leaders from everywhere arrived here, what do you do?"—perhaps, due to the unexpected reaction of the detainee, the officers were paying an unusual attention to his words—"You offer them your platform, your food, your bed...Well, I did the same."

Alejandro Laredo

The tone has lowered now, but when they said no, they meant it. However, I don't believe that the Cuban church had had bad feelings towards the government. Let alone the LEC, because the church is not a place for discussing politics. The church is a place to talk about love, and we have always respected that. Nieto sr. said: "this is a church of love".

Pablo Mejías

I was in Las Tunas in 1997. Ale and Álda arrived with a Guatemalan guy, and they asked me to join them. We visited some towns and carried our support and money with us; they spoke to me during our travel: "A new door has opened; there's an opportunity to send people study at Seminaries abroad. I would like you to lead a group of young people to Mexico." Two groups travelled abroad: a group of six youth to attend a one-year program, and another group of six for another year; that door was shut. Everything was kept very quiet. Few denominations were able to do send people abroad back then.

Alejandro Laredo

I started to work as administrator at the Nazarene Seminary in Punta Brava. I had moved from Cienfuegos to Havana, so, I visited the League from time to time. I remember that I was prophesied more than once that those that had gone abroad would return. I have never gotten attached to any place, but the fact is that, at that moment, God had not spoken to me yet. Finally, my wife and I decided to go back to the League at the end of the 90s. We did so, when God said to us that it was time for us to come. I was away from the Evangelical League of Cuba for two decades, and, by the time I returned, there had been huge changes. Some of the them were the growth in church attendance, and the importance attributed to leadership training; I have heard only few churches talk about leadership the way this church does. I believe that it was due to the growth of the denomination. The more it grows the more leaders are needed to take care of new members. The first Christians gathered at homes. And you need a cell leader; many of today's pastors led cells, territories, and districts before becoming pastors. This structure has favored church planting all over the country. Community work is still vital for us: one cell per block, one church per neighborhood.

Pablo Mejías

Upon my return from Mexico, Ale told me that our churches in Camagüey had doctrinal problems. The point is that the League has never rejected anybody coming from a different denomination; although it is a requirement to attend our service for one year in order to become an official member of the denomination. Here, as in the US, brothers and sisters from different denominations congregate; they are—no offense—“migrants”. But some of them had distorted the Sound Doctrine, and Ale sent me—a member of the League—to solve the issue with God’s help. That’s why I’m saying that the growth in the 90s was not one hundred percent positive; it brought about minor conflicts and bitter memories.

Ester Selles

Everyone who had studied at Los Pinos Nuevos Seminary received an invitation to attend its 70th anniversary event. My husband attended the ceremony, and I joined him. A week later, my daughter departed to heaven.

Alejandro Laredo

We came back in 1998; from that moment I fulfilled my duties as church administrator until 2011. We had arranged the whole moving thing on a Friday night in Cienfuegos; we knew about Ester Nieto’s murder the following morning. She was the pastor’s sister and church Secretary. I mean: we went through a very sensitive moment in the League’s history. Something from which, I believe, older members have not yet recovered. Although, it is in the past now, it keeps coming back; it doesn’t stop hurting. She died on Friday and Alejandro preached on Sunday. We all thought that he was going to cry at the pulpit, but he didn’t even speak about it. He couldn’t allow himself to address the church with the spirit of defeat. One day he said: “I haven’t had the chance to mourn for my sister...and I don’t believe I ever will”.

Alejandro Laredo

I heard about the Evangelical Celebration before I returned to the League. There was a pastor from North Carolina who visited the Nazarene Seminary. I was studying there and joined him as his interpreter. One day he told me a prophecy, right after he was denied his request to use the stadium for an Evangelical Campaign in Pinar del Río. He said that he had seen the possibility of doors opening. When I got back to the League, the arrangements for the Celebration had begun. I told myself: “This is going well”. Naturally, the Council of Churches—that acts as interlocutor with the State—made it happen; so that no church in particular was in charge of preparing the event. Although, the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) did have a leading role in it. The League is registered with number 1080 in the Associations Registry. When I was Secretary, in the early 70s, I was the one who handled important letters and documents. Once they were written, I took them to a lawyer who represented us before the State. Then, the Council of Churches—formerly called Ecumenical Council—was created and a mediator was no longer needed. The State appointed a representative to handle church matters. The CCC was important in that sense; even though the LEC is not a part of that institution.

Oscar León

The Pope’s visit in 1998 was also important in relieving the existing tensions. Naturally, there were huge ceremonies, because the Catholic Church has its own State which is the Vatican City. The treatment it receives is that of a State. (This gives it an easier access to government-to-government dialogs); which we as Evangelicals do not have. For instance, the Assemblies of God do not have a World Government but a World Council. So, it was logical that they thought that the Evangelical Church should hold an event of that magnitude. The Evangelical Celebration was held in 1999, and Alejandro, as its direct coordinator, was involved in the creation of some things such as: stickers, watches, flags and posters. He was very happy with it indeed, because it was the first event of its kind in forty-and-so years that the Church did outside the temples. And most

importantly, it had an interdenominational nature.

Kurt Urbanek has written that the Cuban government has authorized protestants to hold a series of open-air events.¹³⁵ Due to the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1889.

On the other hand, Odén Marichal, president of the (officialist) Cuban Church Council in the 90s, explains that the Cuban Evangelical Celebration was going to be held in 1996. “We had to postpone it for different reasons: we didn’t hold it before the Pope’s visit to avoid people to think that we intended to counter his visit; we didn’t hold it right after Pope’s visit, to avoid people to think we intended to ‘clear the air’; so, we had to postpone it”,¹³⁶ the Cuban episcopal reverend said.

Either way, the Celebration was a turning point in the way the Church reached the Cuban society. According to Urbanek, from may 30, 1990, 18 mass meetings were held throughout the national territory, “they ended with a crowd gathering in the Revolution square in Havana on June 20; over half a million people congregated there”.¹³⁷ Cuban mass media talked about the incidents of the Celebration.

Urbanek, who was a prominent Baptist missionary in the capital city at the moment, asserts that the event made possible for protestants to go preaching door to door and carry out a massive distribution of bibles.¹³⁸

Pablo Mejías

The arrangements for the Evangelical Celebration coincided with our stay in Mexico. It surprised me because, for Ale, it was a dream come true: a great opportunity to preach in public spaces, and so on. Juan Vereecken and Noelia Duncan gave us the news. Alejandro sent out for things to use to print logos: keyholders, pens, t-shirts.

Alejandro Laredo

Alejandro gave him new ideas from the moment he became part of the organizing committee. We had the t-shirts made, for instance, at the Santa Fe Flag Factory; I myself supervised the production process. Our board of directors coordinated many things and the money to pay for some of those things came from our church.

Álida León Ale was part of the Organizing Committee, and promoted many of the things related to the celebration thanks to his creativity, enthusiasm and the help from young and talented people who were part of the League.

¹³⁵ Kurt Urbanek: Cuba’s great awakening, Lexington, USA, 2013, p. 110.

¹³⁶ Caridad Massón Sena: op. cit., p. 122.

¹³⁷ Kurt Urbanek: op. cit., p. 110.

¹³⁸ Ibidem.

Pablo Mejías

We attended a course at a school where there was a man who owned a t-shirt factory. Our first logo proposal was designed there. It had the flags of Cuba and Mexico, but Ale was not very fond of it. So, we sold each t-shirt for a dollar; for every dollar we made we bought two white t-shirts and printed the design and slogan they sent from Havana on them.

We would send loads of key rings, pens and t-shirts to Havana with anyone traveling there. That’s how they received hundreds and hundreds of materials.

Olga Lidia

Alejandro chose me to help him out with matters related to the organization of the Evangelical Celebration. I would leave the children with my mom, because I got home very late at night sometimes. Alejandro was not part of it at the beginning, but later on, he was added to the team...because of the financial issue. He was a good asset in that sense, and he seized every opportunity.

Álida León

At that time, we had the support of many countries because we had fostered our relations with so many people who were waiting for this moment; and when it finally came, they gave speeches, and promoted and supported our event. The organizing committee decided to host an event in Marianao because it was one of the municipalities with the highest number of churches and denominations. It was an exception to the rule, because the events had been planned to be held in the provinces, not in the municipalities. They suggested that I led the liturgy in Marianao, so, we were very important at the moment.

Both the children’s and the women’s choirs rehearsed in our temple; they made up hundred voices each. They both had an interdenominational nature. There were people from every church; the musicians played live—something that was exclusive of Marianao’s congregation—; the message was delivered by an Adventist; we opened with a parade with members of all municipalities and the church was portrayed as a bride. It was a really special moment. The event was finally held in the square located in 124th street because we were not sure of how many people were going to attend the service. The location was chosen a week or two prior to the event. We keep videos and pictures that attest that more than 30 thousand people congregated that day.

Olga Lidia

We celebrated the event in 124th street. We left our place and walked down 45th street to Marianao square, while singing and waving our flags. I took both

my children, aged 7 and 9, with me; they were very little. The crowd of hundreds of people stopped the traffic. There were even more people on 124th street. They built a sort of platform, and people stood there and sang and danced. Thousands and thousands of t-shirts were printed for the occasion. They were designed at the LEC. Sandy Cancino and I worked on them. The slogan for the celebration—“Jesus Christ, by all and for all”—was also our church’s idea.

Álida León

The slogan was ecumenical; our objective was to reach the whole nation with it; we thought of the Christians and non-converts. We wanted to hold a celebration so that the Cuban people saw that there was a church, that there was a God, that the people of Christ was united, that it was Jesus’ will: “that they may all be one (...) so that the world may believe”. It was beautiful, because the Christian people came together.

Alejandro Laredo

Nieto could not even stand on the platform to pray. They had made themselves clear before the Celebration; they had warned him not to do it. He didn’t give much importance to it; he had a long-term vision. All his life he wished for his church to be allowed to preach to the crowd in public spaces. He was not going to get upset just because he could not stand on a platform.

Gloria Jorge

It was huge! Wonderful! It was so crowded!

Alejandro Laredo

He was among the pastors during the Celebration at the Revolution Square, of course; he was sitting somewhere on the platform. Fidel was there.

Odén Marichal preached that day. Many people believed that his speech had a political connotation. Dozens of them stood up and left the place.

Pablo Mejías

Nonetheless, the Evangelical Celebration was a success. The permissibility granted to churches led to a massive change of mindset throughout the entire island. Back in Trinidad, where I pastored, several denominations were allowed to hold their events in movie theaters and public spaces.

Álida León

The event extended to Holguín, Pinar del Río, Matanzas; and the celebrations in Baracoa, Camagüey, Santa Clara and Havana were broadcasted. We were not allowed to make a call for salvation at those squares. That was something peculiar about it; but we left our message. Believers and non-believers attended the

celebration, some of them went out of curiosity and others, just to be part of it. More people started to go to church after that

The people of God had the opportunity to be made known. There were no statistics nor were we aware of how many people believed, or how far the gospel had spread.

SUNSET

away their hope. It's a good practice to tell our falls, our victories, our tragedies and joys from the present so we can appreciate what we have. "It's another way of saying Ebenezer," Noel adds

I

A cousin of mine lost his flesh fighting the apartheid in southern Africa. He was given a hero's welcome; that skin with bones who never believed in anything, thanked heaven for being able to stand on his feet. He feeds his fish on a dreary day, locks the door behind him and goes out to find a church. He drops on a pew, listening to the preacher and attempting to pray; what is pray? His eyes return to the man's face and he's absorbed in his words: "There's no one like Christ. If this is men's work it will fall apart, but if this is God's, no one will be able to destroy it". He leaves, suspiciously; he calls me from a public phone and tells me what he's seen and heard. He's arrived to a conclusion: "Cousin, no one is aware of it, but that dude was doing counterrevolution". Suspicion can be very persistent. In ghost societies, ghosts are the majority.

II

A story travels by word of mouth, with the strength of a live myth. At the end of the 90s, the then Mexican ambassador to Cuba congregated at the League. In the final days of his mission in the island, the Cuban State decided to decorate him for his good work. The man invited Alejandro Nieto and Fernando Sosa—his pastor in Mexico—to the farewell event. Ale gave Fernando a Bible. Fidel was attending the change of president in the Aztec country, so they would both take the same flight. Once on the plane, Fernando managed to get to Fidel and say to him:

"Mr. President, there's someone who's praying for you and wants Cuba for Christ." And Fidel took the Bible that had been dedicated by Alejandro.

III

A sunset welcomes a reflective rest. Noel Nieto, Alejandro's firstborn child, is convinced that telling the story of the denomination is not navel-gazing. Being in his twenties and co-pastor at the Evangelical League, he believes that the best way of expressing his gratitude to God for His guidance, is by remembering. The people of Israel was a people with memories. They built their days with pieces from the past. Neither the long periods of captivity nor the Roman domination, nor the Diaspora nor the Holocaust could take

APPENDICES

LEC'S PASTORATES

- 1- Danilo Fernando Gonzalo y García (April 20, 1953-July 24, 1958)
- 2- Howard Lewis (July 25, 1958-March 15, 1961)
- 3- Danilo Fernando Gonzalo y García (March 16, 1961-March 20, 1963)
- 4- Eugenio Castañeda y Prado (March 21, 1963-April 22, 1966)
- 5- Alejandro Nieto Campos (April 23, 1966-October 30, 1982)
- 6- Alejandro Nieto Selles (October 31, 1982-October 25, 2009)
- 7- Álda León Báez (2010-)

INTERVIEWEES IN THIS BOOK

Alejandro Laredo (Havana, 1948) He is the LEC's oldest active member. He goes to that church since he was a child, and has held several positions at the denomination, including those of Secretary, Administrator and Co-pastor.

Álida León (Victoria de Las Tunas, 1962) She is Alejandro Nieto Selles' wife; she became the president of the League in 2010.

Edith Machado (Remedios, Sancti Spíritus, 1932) She was the leader of the Ladies Department in the 70s. She's a close friend of Pastors Ester Selles' and Nieto Campos'.

Ester Selles (Puerto Padre, Las Tunas, 1935-Victoria de Las Tunas, 2020) She was the LEC's Treasurer during her husband's —Alejandro Nieto Campos— pastorate. She founded the *Hogar* magazine in the 80s and has been an active member of the denomination ever since.

Gloria Jorge (Rodas, Cienfuegos, 1937) She goes to the League since the late 50s. She is a friend of the Nieto family.

José Luis Salinas (Havana, 1922) He was the LEC's founder. He was a board member.

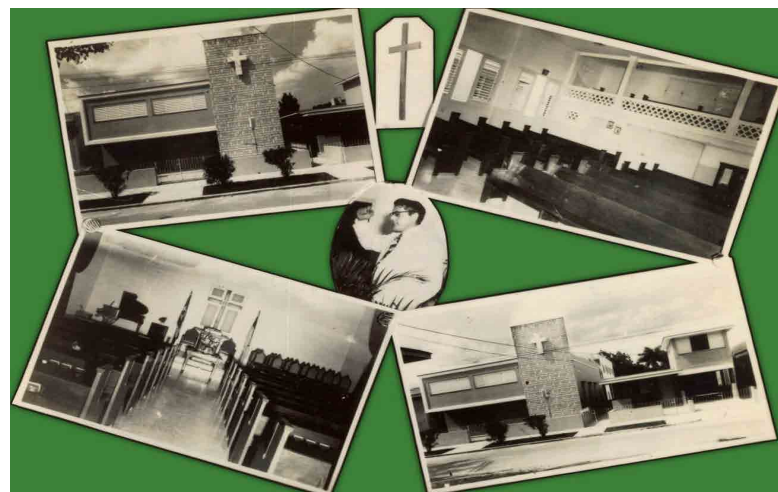
Olga Lidia Candelario (La Habana, 1964) She was the leader of the Youth Department at the League in the 70s, and also, the head of Vida Plena Ministry for many years.

Pablo Mejías (La Habana, 1960) He is a close friend of Alejandro Nieto Selles'. He has been an itinerant pastor of the LEC.

Pedro Oscar León (Victoria de Las Tunas, 1942) He leads the Assemblies of God and knows very well the history of Christianity in Cuba. He is related to the League through his daughter's —Álida León— marriage to Alejandro Nieto Selles.

Urbano Durán (Caibarién, 1927-Havana, 2018) He's been a LEC's member since 1969; and was the president of the Gentlemen's Department during Nieto Campos' pastorate.

GRAPHIC TESTIMONY



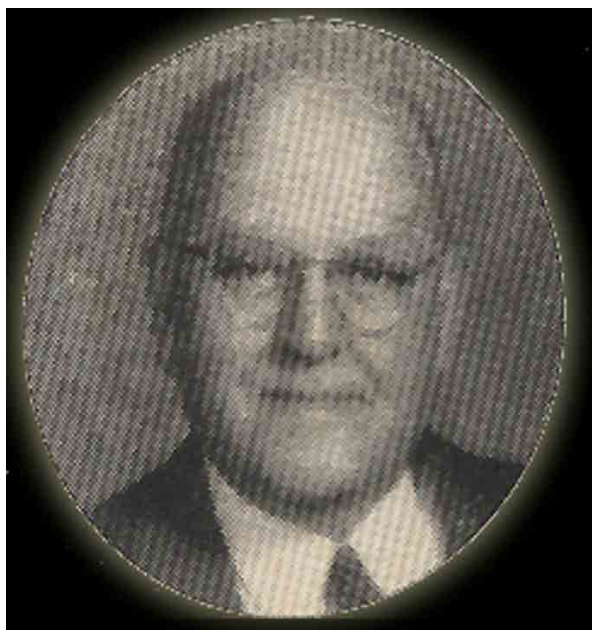
External and internal view of the temple inaugurated in 1954.
At the center of the collage Danilo Gonzalo.




The work with children was of great importance during the pastorate of Danilo Gonzalo..



Another view of the temple in the 1950s.



Reverend
Elmer Gedeon Anderson.


Liga Evangélica de Cuba
 APARTADO 71
 MARIANAO, L. H.
 REV. E. G. ANDERSON, PRESIDENTE DE HONOR
 REV. DANILO GONZALO, DIRECTOR
 TELEFONO B0-8408

Marianao, Julio de 1953.

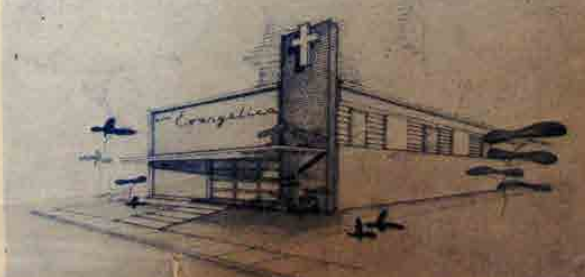
Muy Apreciable Amigo:

Durante cuatro largos años, LA LIGA EVANGELICA DE CUBA, una obra dependiente de Dios para su sostén y normal funcionamiento, una empresa titánica de fe, ha desarrollado sus principales actividades en una antigua casa de madera que hemos ido adaptando y agrandando de acuerdo con el crecimiento que Dios mismo ha dado a nuestra labor.

Pero he aquí que ya nos resulta del todo inadecuada para acoger al gran número de personas que asisten a nuestros cultos, buscando conocer más de Cristo y de su amor.

Necesitamos imperiosamente un templo vasto y acogedor, que se alce como faro que irradies la luz del Evangelio a las almas perdidas en el pecado. A la urgente consecución del mismo van dirigidos todos nuestros esfuerzos.

¿No querría Ud. tener parte en una obra tan necesaria y ennoblecida? Su contribución pudiera ser en efectivo, o proveyéndonos algún material de construcción. A una llamada suya a nuestro teléfono B0-8408, pasaríamos a recoger su generoso aporte. Muchas gracias.

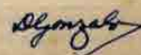


Proyecto del templo que hará posible el esterezo de todos en la Calle D a. n. entre General
 Monjevo y A. de las Palmas, Barrio Lazcábal, MARIANAO.

La fotografía le muestra el templo que al reducido costo de \$7,500.00 y con capacidad para docientas personas, soñamos levantar por la gracia de Dios y para su única gloria. Por muy poco se ha de lograr algo muy útil y necesario. Coopere, coopere con nosotros para su edificación.

Será un sitio en el que resonarán las eternas verdades de Dios y el maravilloso mensaje de salvación mediante Jesucristo. De gran provecho espiritual para todos.
 "Dios puede lograrlo, y si todos cooperamos el templo se hará".

"Ahora se necesitan más que nunca templos de amor que desaten todo lo que hay en el cubano de generoso."—José Martí.

Esperando su valiosa cooperación,
 POR LA LIGA EVANGELICA DE CUBA,

 Director.

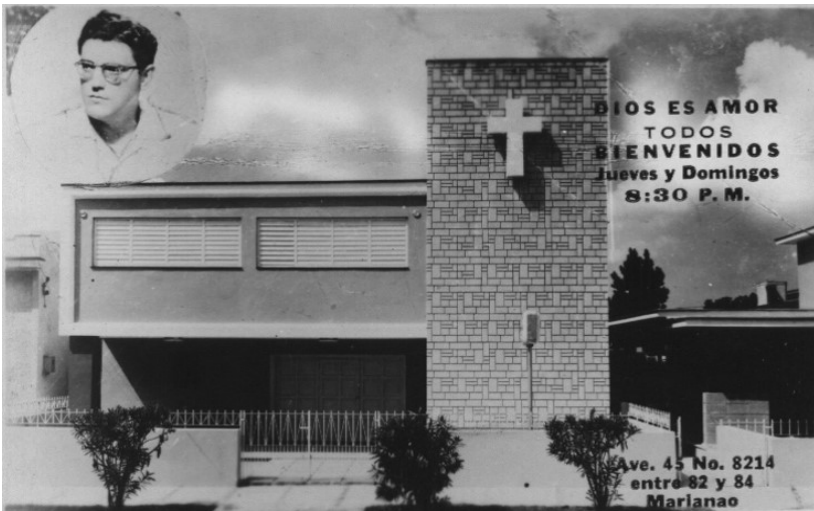
Information about the crowdfunding for the construction of the temple.



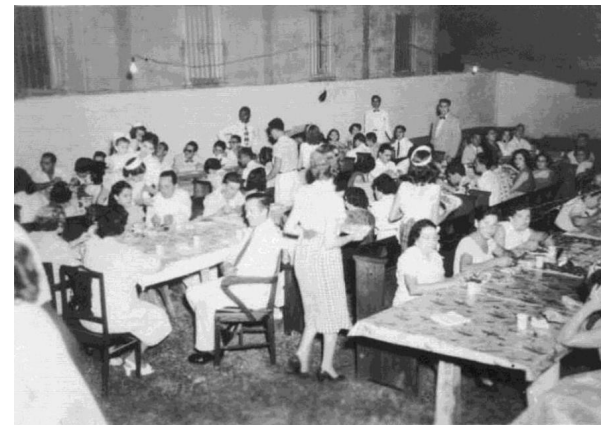
Reverend Danilo Gonzalo was the first pastor of the Evangelical League.



Reverend Danilo Gonzalo led the church for more than five years.



Invitation card in the 1950s. The original timetables are shown in the upper right corner.



Social reunion in the 50's.



Religious service in the 50's.



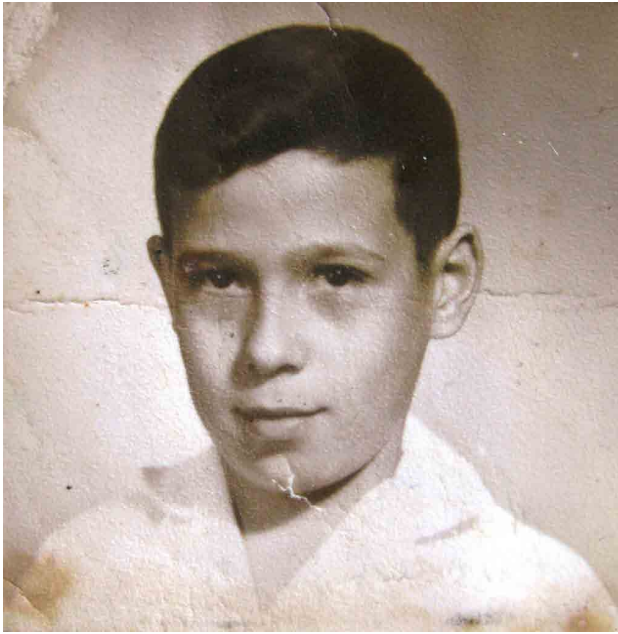
Fidel Castro attacks evangelical churches because their opposition to the communism.



Reverend Alejandro Nieto Campos and his wife, Esther Selles, led the church for 16 years.



Alejandro Nieto Campos at the Pinos Nuevos Seminar, in the late 1950s.



Alejandro Nieto Selles. Photo taken in the 1960s.



Alejandro Nieto Campos, at the pastoral house, next to the church.



El local correspondiente a la dirección Barcelona 106 (sobre estas líneas) es actualmente un centro docente de la provincia La Habana



The place corresponding to Barcelona 106 is currently a temple of the Christian Reformed Church.



Children's choir at Christmas 1964. The indicated child is Pablo Mejía.



Baptism certification of Gloria Jorge.



Worship during the Revival of the 1970s.



"Vida Plana Ministry reproduced thousands of tapes and cassettes with music and testimonies to bless the Church. Even today there are still many in the study of the LEC. My dad was in charge of making those copies many times."

Noel Nieto León



Nieto family in the 1990s. Noel, the oldest son of the marriage between Áilda and Alejandro, is the tallest of the three children in the photo.



Beginning the 1990s the church experienced massive growth in its membership. The original temple became insufficient, and a series of structural modifications were necessary.



The temple grows in the 90s.

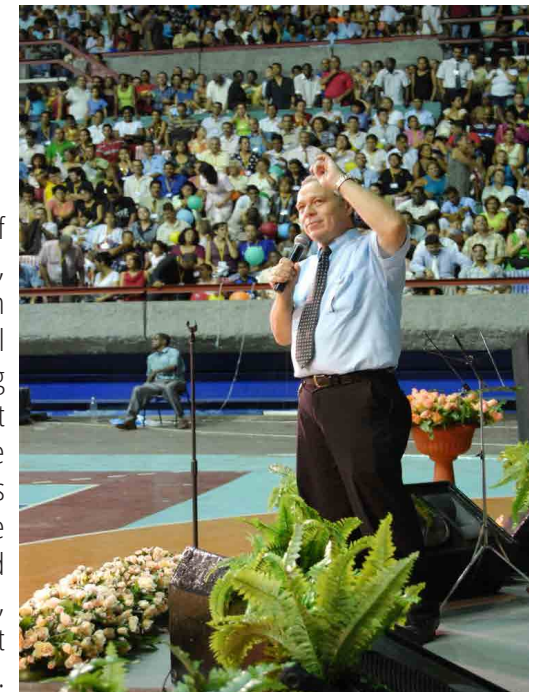


The help of fraternal organizations and leaders outside Cuba such as Juan Vereecken (with the raised hand, in the center of the photo) has been important for the growth of the LEC.



Vida Plena was a relevant tool for the support and unity of the evangelical Church throughout Cuba during the economic crisis known as Período Especial.

Under the leadership of Alejandro Nieto Selles, the LEC went from being a tiny evangelical association to being among the four most widespread on the island. The photo is from 2007, during the celebration of the 53rd anniversary of the LEC, at the Ramón Fonst stadium.





Sticker like this one filled Cuba during the 1999 Evangelical Celebration.



One of the first logos of the LEC, on one of the stickers that arrived from Mexico to support the Evangelical Celebration.



Current logo of the LEC.



Members of LEC going to the concentration at the Plaza de 124, in Marianao, Havana.

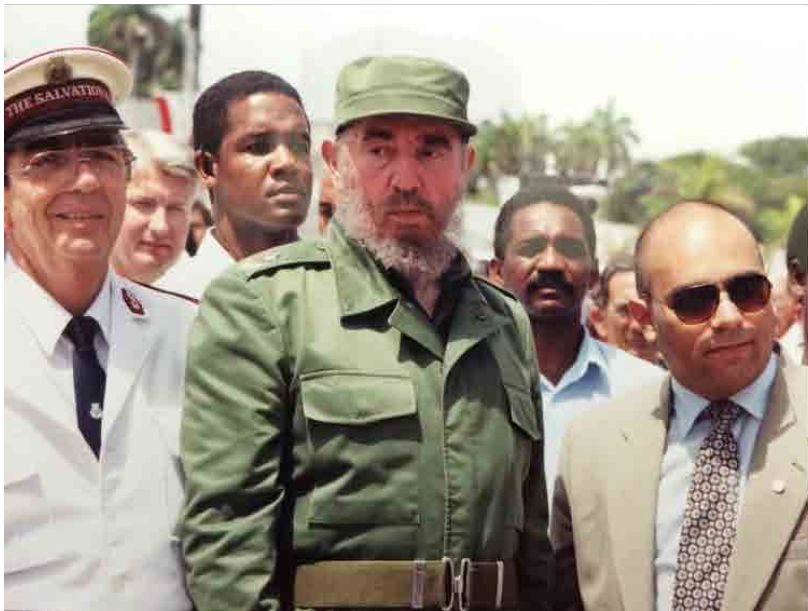


The concentration at the Plaza de 124, in Marianao, Havana includes worship with many young participants.

Evangelical Celebration.



The independent journalist Ramón Humberto Colás reported that in the Celebration a few evangelical leaders related to the regime were prioritized to speak in public. Others, like Alejandro Nieto Selles, were relegated.



Dictator Fidel Castro attended the rally in Havana in the summer of 1999. Despite the limitations the regime imposed, it was an unprecedented opportunity during communism for evangelicals to preach publicly.

The concentration at the Plaza de la Revolución (in Havana) registered 100 thousand participants.



Alejandro Nieto Selles during the 1999 Evangelical Celebration. In the photo above with religious leaders. In the photo below Álda León after the concentration at Plaza de 124, in Marianao.



Cities like Camaguey (in the photos), Baracoa, Holguín experienced massive concentrations during the Evangelical Celebration.



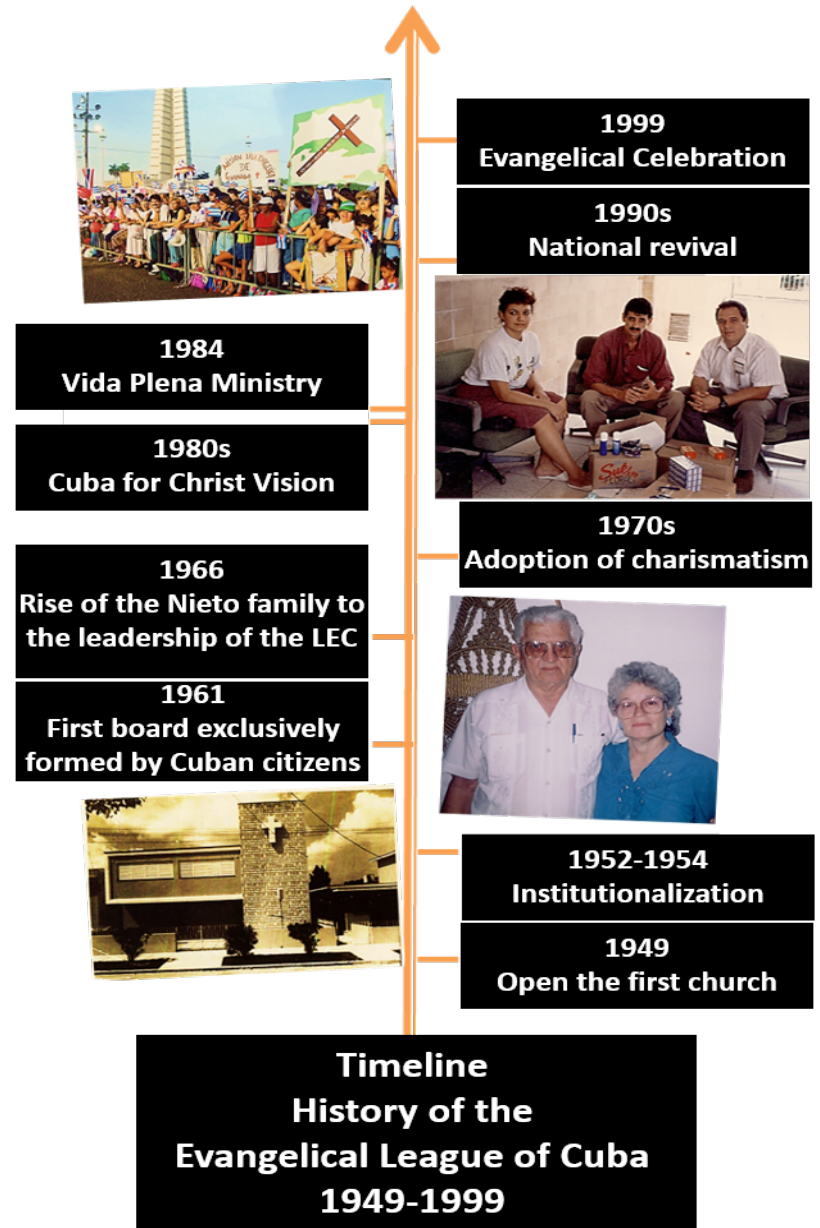
Danilo Gonzalo

Alejandro Nieto Campos

Alejandro Nieto Selles

Álda León

Pastors in LEC's history.



Timeline.

HACE tres años, el 20 de Marzo de 1949, con sinceros deseos de servir al Señor y ser de bendición a las almas, abrió sus puertas la Liga Evangélica de Cuba, que desde su local humilde, pero revestido de la gracia de Dios, comenzó a proclamar el Evangelio Redentor de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo.

Desde su inicio, nos ha brindado su apoyo espiritual y sostén económico la figura extraordinaria del Rev. E. G. Anderson, que en su amor al Señor y a Cuba,

quiso dotar a nuestra amada

patria de un nuevo local, del cual salieran a la luz las eternas verdades de Dios.

Tres años han transcurrido de labor y bendiciones, tres años en que la mano del Señor se ha estado manifestando pródiga-

mente permitiéndonos ver algunos frutos. Pero, cuánto anhelábamos un templo más amplio para adorar al

Señor!

Una vez más El

o y ó nuestras

oraciones y el generoso corazón del Rev. E. G. Anderson volvió a latir por Cuba y sus necesidades y hoy tenemos una iglesia más hermosa y más amplia que dedicar al servicio de Dios y de la humanidad.

¡Nos sentimos tan agradecidos al Señor! . . . y le rogamos ardientemente derrame su poder sobre nuestras vidas y su amada obra, a fin de que en este sagrado recinto que nos ha deparado, muchas almas conozcan al Cristo Redentor. Asimismo le pedimos que compense ampliamente al querido Rev. E. G. Anderson por tanta bondad y desprendimiento cristianos. Amén.

Flyer of the Dedication Cult of the new church, 1952.



Founding Minute Book, 1953.



Celebrating in 1994 the 40th anniversary of the LEC.



Alejandro Nieto Selles and Álda León during their Silver Weddings.



Alejandro Nieto Selles, in one of his last travels for Cuba, bringing resources to churches



During the ordination of Álda León as pastor of the LEC. 19th January 2010. She was the first women leading the church and a very rare example in Cuba.

