

God's Grace in Cuba:
The Beginning of the WELS Mission Work in Cuba

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The Lord commands us ¹⁹ to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. ¹” A daunting task as one views the size of the world. Everywhere we look in the world we see fields that are ripe for the Lord's harvest. Some countries, however, will not permit the declaration of the gospel within its borders. How do we reach these lost souls? We pray earnestly for the Lord's guidance. The Lord does, however, guide us to the harvest fields that are ready for harvest. The Lord has lead the WELS to the harvest fields of Cuba. This is a detailed and close look at just how the work in Cuba began. I wanted to make this a detailed report so one could see just what took place, how plans had to be revised and reworked and the difficulty of beginning work in a country in which missionaries are not permitted to live. I would also like to note that as detailed as this report is it does not include many of the daily journals of the missionaries which give wonderful insights into the Lord's guidance as they worked in Cuba. We will consider the very beginning of the WELS work in Cuba up to the time when the WELS called the first full time missionary.

The Country of Cuba

Cuba is a country located about 90 miles south of the Florida Keys. It has a population of about twelve million people. The capital city is the most recognizable city of Havana. Havana is a city of about two and a half million people. The president of Cuba is Fidel Castro who is on the downward side of seventy years. The vice president who is not far behind in years is Raul Castro Ruz. The country of Cuba is one of the last countries in the western hemisphere that

¹*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Mt 28:19-20). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

clings to communism. What does this mean for Cuba? Everything is done for the good of the country. When the WELS fist began in Cuba the people were in dire poverty having food rationed and a lack of essential needs that we take for granted. Despite hardships the people of Cuba were and are surviving and are for the most part happy.

The Possibility of WELS Mission Work in Cuba

John Strackbein made the discovery of possible mission work in Cuba from one of his neighbors. Missionary John Strackbein writes:

The story of my trip to Cuba started about five years ago. My wife and I were invited to lunch with my neighbor. We accepted with pleasure. When the day came to eat, we went over. After a little while someone else came to visit and then another. All of them had Bibles under their arms. What was supposed to be lunch turned into a Pentecostal prayer service complete with a lot of hollering and speaking in tongues. Barb and I went to the kitchen and tried to be as invisible as possible. It was a very embarrassing situation. Some good did come of it. The pastor of my neighbor, Julio Alamo, gave a talk on Cuba. He goes three times a year to preach and teach. The question immediately came to mind, if he as a Puerto Rican American can get in and if Castro lets him conduct religious activities, why not the WELS? ²

The Lord raises opportunities out of the “most embarrassing situations.” Missionary John Strackbein was being led by the Lord to a new harvest field, the harvest field of Cuba. This was just the beginning, however, and many obstacles had to be overcome. After posing the question of possible work in Cuba to the Executive Committee of Latin America they asked John Strackbein to interview Pastor Julio Alamo. This interview conducted on February 25, 1992 provided John Strackbein with some important information regarding work in Cuba.

“For the most part the people are unexposed to the Gospel...Most of the people live in a spiritual vacuum and do not take part in religious services. Most exposure to the Gospel comes

² Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation by the WELS. 1993, Pg 2. Hereafter cited as Strackbein, John, To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

from person to person contact.³” The Cuban people, for the most part, have no religious background and therefore many religious groups have taken advantage of this vacuum with missionary work in Cuba. The Assembly of God, the Baptists, the Church of God, and Catholics all have some presence in the country--setting up churches wherever possible. These churches have been successful due to the shortage of Gospel proclamation and the great thirst for the Gospel.

This thirst for the Gospel was not the only valuable information gathered from this interview. There were many questions about where and how to begin mission work? How to get the necessary paperwork to travel to Cuba? What condition the country was in? Would we be starting from nothing or helping Lutherans already on the island? Pastor Alamo provided, to some degree, the answers to these questions.

The main mission work that had been conducted by the churches already present had taken place in metropolitan areas. The best way to do this was to set up some organization and establish local congregations and a larger organizational structure tying the congregations together. Expatriates were allowed to enter the country to aid in these activities as long as they did not preach or teach anything against the government but there was some difficulty of actually entering Cuba. Permission to enter was required both by the United States and Cuban government. At this point John Strackbein did not know if he could travel to Cuba, how to even arrange travel, and how long he could stay. This would be learned as the first trip was planned. Pastor Alamo also made clear that as long as one did not preach against the government one could feel safe and actually be safe in the country as a foreigner.

³ Strackbein, John. Interview of Rev. Julio Alamo, A Part Time Missionary to Cuba. San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 25, 1992; pg 1. Hereafter cited as Strackbein, John. Interview with Julio Alamo.

How did one enter the country? Pastor Alamo communicated the importance of getting in touch with Dr. Carniado in Cuba. He would be able to provide the necessary documents and information to be able enter the country. The problem arose when Dr. Carniado did not respond to John Strackbein's letter requesting information regarding entrance into the country. John Strackbein then requested help from Pastor Alamo. Pastor Alamo and other pastors who traveled to Cuba with him took aid for the Cuban people. This was a way to help the Cuban people and be allowed to travel to Cuba. Strackbein saw an opportunity and asked for help from the WELS aid fund.

If the WELS aid fund could contribute two or three thousand dollars to his fund, Pastor Alamo would be happy to ask his church in Cuba to pay for my ticket over and get the necessary approval from the Cuban Government. The way I understand U.S. law, the only way for an American to get into Cuba for religious purposes is if some organization inside of Cuba will agree to pay 80% of all costs⁴

The only way that seemed possible to enter Cuba was through the invitation made by Pastor Alamo's local Church of God in Cuba and if the WELS aid fund would promise a gift. This request for the grant of two thousand dollar was approved by the relief fund and plans were made with Pastor Alamo to travel to Cuba. The funds would help aid the Cuban people suffering in poverty. The Cuban people were indeed suffering.

Allow me to say a little more about this. The poverty of the country was spread among all Cubans. The social structure of the people was vague. There was no big distinction between classes. The more educated persons had higher paying jobs but the difference in pay was not that great. Therefore any outreach and help would be done to all the people since all were under hard economic times and were considered the same class level. Part of this hardship was due to the fall of communism in the Soviet Union. The fall made the U.S. economic blockade more

⁴ Strackbein, John. Letter to Pastor Kenneth Strack on November 21, 1992.

painful and forced difficult living conditions upon almost everyone on the island. The people in Cuba were facing shortages of basic items including medicine and food.

Initial Trip to Cuba

The stage was set for the WELS to make its initial exploratory trip to Cuba. With the help of Pastor Alamo the necessary paperwork was acquired and the trip was planned. John Strackbein would join Pastor Alamo on a trip to Cuba in February of 1993. The trip was planned and goals were then set for the trip. "Some verbal goals and objectives were given to me (John Strackbein) by Pastor Retberg and the Puerto Rican Mission Council, Pastor Baerbock and Pastor Satorius."⁵ The goals and objectives were the following:

GOAL: To find a way to bring the Gospel message of free salvation by faith in Jesus Christ to the people of Cuba.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

1. Exploration leading to a future WELS presence if communism should fall.
2. Exploration to find a method of bringing the Gospel to the Cubans from without if communism should not fall in the near future.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:

1. Buy and distribute food.
2. Interview different church leaders.
3. Interview government officials about the MAP program for free medicine under a specific license from the U.S., about specific rules for obtaining religious statistics, and about Christian information centers.
4. To visit all contacts given to me from Puerto Rico and Miami.
5. To distribute Mensajero Luterano magazines and other Christian literature and through them to gain more contacts.
6. To rent a building or use a home to show the Communicating Christ video to contacts gained in the food distribution and to determine their response to it.

⁵ Strackbein, John. "To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

7. To find out what kind of precautions and steps will be necessary if future visits are to be made.⁶

The first trip to Cuba brought many eye opening experiences which yielded what would become some very important contacts and information regarding what the WELS would be able to do in Cuba.⁷ John recorded some of the observations made about a Lutheran Church in Cuba. “The joy of finding a Lutheran Church in Cuba was the first of many wonderful discoveries. The discovery that there was an active Lutheran Church in Cuba shows that the Lord is guiding the spread of his Word in all the world.”⁸ All the Christian churches were growing rapidly. The government estimated that the number of Christians had grown by 20,000 since the statistics for 1992 were written. The church was growing despite unbelievably tough circumstances including no cars or bikes, no catechisms or temples and very few Bibles. Again God’s grace was clearly evident as he cultivated the harvest fields in Cuba. Where did the Lutherans come from? How long had they been in Cuba? How did they survive? The Lutheran Church in Cuba has a history. Here is a brief summary of their history:

1907--The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod began work in Jacksonville and Gerona on the Island of Pines among English speakers from the Cayman Islands and Jamaica. Both Jacksonville and Gerona had church buildings with small schools. In Jacksonville the pastor and his wife were teachers. Everything was conducted in English until 1945.

1945—Work was begun in Havana in la Puntilla, Vedado, Buena Vista and Marti neighborhoods. The congregation in Marti has one chapel, one room school, and parsonage.

1953—Work begun in Boca de Galafre in the house of Irene Rivers. Attendance of up to 100. Work also begun in Camilo Cien Fuegos.

1959—A large church building was dedicated in Maramar, Havana, in September

⁶ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

⁷ I cannot go into all the details of every day of the trip as recorded by John Strackbein. If one would like a taste of what the daily events were one can read through the reports which will be kept in the WELS archives at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

⁸ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

with Sunday School rooms in the basement. The congregation had 165 members with Sunday services in Spanish, English and German. At this time the LCC (Lutheran Church of Cuba) had 5 congregations, 300 members, 4 church buildings, 2 Missionaries and 3 Cuban pastors.

1961—The two missionaries and two of the Cuban pastors fled the country. Pastor Roberto Bartutis remained as sole pastor.

1973—The church buildings were delivered to, or taken by, the government, and legal papers of all churches were retained, including the legal papers of the Lutheran Church of Cuba. Pastor Bartutis continued to visit members of the LCC. Impossible to get Bible or other materials for work.

1990—In the early 1990's the government allows house churches and several other pastors with varying backgrounds to join the LCC.⁹

The Lutheran Church of Cuba was started by the LC-MS but most of the people John Strackbein spoke with did not feel a relationship existed with Missouri or, in other words, there was no fellowship between the two. In fact, some people didn't even know that it existed. Some of the people did know what fellowship was because Bartutis' group would not fellowship with other Lutheran groups with whom they had doctrinal differences. The impression gained from the members of the LCC (Lutheran Church of Cuba) was that many had not really thought through whether they were in fellowship with the LC-MS or not since it had been many years since they had practiced it. John Strackbein found a positive in all the discussions regarding Missouri Synod and the LCC. The people wanted to discuss doctrine first before deciding whether a closer relationship with the WELS could exist.

Doctrinally, the LCC seemed weak in several areas. Strackbein, however, did not purposely get into a lot of doctrinal discussions because his visit was one of discovery and acquaintance but did take the opportunity to point to Bible passages when the chance presented itself. There was some training in Bible truths being done through Confirmation classes. At the time there were 15 classes. The problem was that both child and adult classes last only six months.

⁹ Retberg, Lawrence. Brief History of the Lutheran Church of Cuba (LCC).

One weak area that was discovered was in the area of Church and Ministry. Strackbein gave an example, “Pastor Bartutis once let Rafael preach although he is still studying to be a Lutheran and as yet does not believe in infant baptism.”¹⁰ Another weakness was that at times women leaders were called pastoras. There had been times when women taught Bible Studies to men. Strackbein made clear where the WELS stood on these issues and why. Pastor Bartutis said they would be open to study the matter and submit to what the Bible indicates regarding the matter. There were reasons for some of their weaknesses. Strackbein indicated these reasons and asked them to be kept in mind when discussing doctrine with the LCC.

- a. They have not had the tools we take for granted like Bibles and catechisms. In their fight to survive pastors have often taught what they knew in their minds. Ignorance is not what they want. They are starving for food in the form of confessional Christian literature.
- b. Many of their people are new Christians and haven’t had the opportunity to get deeper in the Word.
- c. The groups I saw seem to want to be confessional and be shown from the Bible where they have gone astray.
- d. The so called female pastor difficulty might in part be a matter of semantics whereby the term pastor is given to a woman even though she may lead only women and children. If we want to pursue the matter, someone should be sent to view the churches in action as well as to have doctrinal discussions.
- e. The Lutheran Church is autonomous or indigenous. I doubt if we would want to ruin this. They do, however, need help if they are to survive confessionally. The biggest need seems to be Christian literature and the development of some form of B.I. and Sem. For the training of future Pastors.¹¹

There was much potential for the Lord’s work in Cuba. It was being carried out by the local Pastors as best as they were able and we thank the Lord for blessing the spread of his Word despite difficult conditions.

The LCC was eager to become a confessional church and requested that the WELS come back to help them. Pastor Bartutis said that the WELS was the answer to many of their years of

¹⁰ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

¹¹ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

prayers. After his first visit to Cuba and the opportunities that had been presented Strackbein made the following recommendations for the WELS.

1. That the WELS accept the call to come back as soon as possible. Much has been discovered. The Lutheran churches I saw viewed my visit as an answer to their prayers after many years of waiting. Much was accomplished in this visit, but there still is much the WELS could learn and needs to learn if it wants to develop a closer relationship. The time is especially ripe now to plan for more visits. I say this because, a. Talking and visiting with them would not be an interference with the relationship Missouri thinks it has with them, b. If Castro fell tomorrow, Missouri would probably come back to Cuba in a big way. They would reclaim their closed chapels. They would also find that many of the people are no longer with them, c. They have asked us to come and have recommended Oct. 30- Nov. 12th or 13th. d. it is possible to go to Cuba legally, e. The costs are reasonable if missionaries are utilized, f. Puerto Ricans can get in easier under invitations that North Americans, A soon to be graduated B.I. students has volunteered to be a part of the next team that goes with air costs covered by the Lutheran church in Puerto Rico, g. A weak church could be strengthened leading to fellowship based on confessional unity in doctrine and practice, h. If Castro should fall, we would be in a fantastic position to enter Cuba with missionaries and work side by side with the Lutheran Church of Cuba or to start a new mission if fellowship with them was not possible to obtain, i. If Castro doesn't fall and a doctrinal base for fellowship is found, we could be of great help in providing long term courses in Biblical theology, homiletics, etc.
2. I would recommend that we ask Pastor Bartutis to give his government a written invitation and that we try the tourist route as a last resort.
3. That we would accept the offer of the Evangelist Sergio Cortijo to be a part of the new visitation team.
4. That the MAP International program be examined as a tool for the Dominican Republic and Cuba, and that if it is found to be a useful tool, that I be given a letter of Endorsement from the Mission Board and a copy of the Synod's 501c3 tax exempt letter issued by the Dept. of Treasury indicating it's status as a charitable or nonprofit organization.
5. That if fellowship is obtained, we offer to transport Spanish professors to them several times a year in the form of LA Missionaries, Mexican and or Puerto Rican national B.I. graduates. If it is easier or more desirable, one could consider the option of inviting their students to Texas or Puerto Rico for the same type of arrangement, (crash courses for the period of their stay).¹²

¹² Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Initial Investigation.

The initial trip into Cuba was filled with tension over the extreme care one had to take not to say or do the right thing. The days were long and exhausting but many things were accomplished and many things were learned that would aid the Lord's work and WELS involvement in Cuba.

Second Exploratory Trip to Cuba

“I feel confident, O God. I will sing and play music. Yes, my heart is roused. Wake up, lute and lyre, that I might wake up the dawn. I will thank you among the nations, Lord, and play music to praise you among the people, because your love is greater than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches the skies (Psalm 108:1-4).”

“The words of Scripture taken from the Beck translation above describe how I feel about my second trip to Cuba. By the grace of God many people heard the message of sin and grace and were moved deeply by it.¹³” John Strackbein wrote these words to describe the second trip to Cuba. The trip was made from October 31, 1993—November 14, 1993. Manuel Monroig, a Puerto Rican evangelist, accompanied Strackbein to Cuba. The Lord blessed the second trip to Cuba despite Satan's attacks and attempts to foil his work. The devil tried to stop the trip from even getting started by complicating matters at the Hotel in the Dominican Republic and raising problems with the visas. The Lord, however, led Strackbein and Manuel safely to their destination in Cuba to carry out his work. Strackbein writes once in Cuba, “Carlos rented an old fiat for \$30.00 per day and drove free. The odometer was stuck on 666.6 and reminded me of Prof. Becker. For him, it best represented the triple foreordained failure of Satan and his two agents, the beast from the sea and the beast from the land, to usurp God's place in the very hearts

¹³ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

of men.¹⁴” The Lord was in control and guided the rest of the trip with his hand watching over these two men as they carried his precious message to Cuban souls.

The second trip to Cuba had two goals. One was to obtain as many new contacts as possible and share the Gospel with them. The second was to find out more information about the Lutheran church in Cuba, particularly, to discover more information about the relationship of the Lutheran Churches to the LC-MS or ELCA.

The first goal was accomplished as approximately 100 people saw the Spanish law, Gospel video, “Analiza tu alma” (soul search). Fifty other people hear the Gospel. Ten people saw the Spanish law, Gospel initial presentation video. Three separate classes on baptism were given. Two of these utilized the “Communicating Christ” video dealing with baptism. The classes preceded four private baptisms. Meetings were held with Pastor Bartutis, the President of the Lutheran Church of Cuba, Pastor Ramon Urrutia, Evelio Munoz, and Pastor Pablo Martinez. These pastors asked Strackbein to come back and instruct them with Bible Institute and Seminary level classes. Strackbein made trips to many cities in Cuba to meet with both Lutherans and non Lutherans. Trips were made to Havana, Jose de las Lajas, Guines, Armatosa, Jarujo, Santa Clara, Guane, Boca de Galafre, Pinar del Rio, and Regla. The reason I list these cities, not all on map, is to show that there were many groups who invited Strackbein and Manuel into their homes and allowed them to make presentations. These cities were located all over Cuba, extending from the West to the East. The Lord led Strackbein and Manuel to these homes filled with people hungry for the Gospel and anxious to study God’s Word. Not all these groups were being served and were not all affiliated with a church. The Lutheran Church of Cuba did have many groups that met but there were also other Lutheran Churches active in Cuba.

¹⁴ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

There were four Lutheran groups in Cuba. "One is composed of 30 members and no one seems to know much about them except that they broke off from the Lutheran Church of the Confession which is now affiliated with the LC-MS.¹⁵" The Lutheran Church of the Confession broke off from Pastor Bartutis' group in the late 1980s. It was headed by Rev. Miguel Ebanez, age 45. It seemed that there was some tension between Bartutis' group and that of Ebanez. LC-MS wanted to have all the groups join in fellowship under the leadership of Ebanez and the Lutheran Church of the Confession. The problem seemed to deal with who would be the leader. The LC-MS wanted Ebanez to be the leader of one unified group instead of Bartutis who was the leader for most of the Castro years long before Ebanez came on the scene. When Pastor Bartutis refused to turn over leadership Ebanez formed his own group and took a large portion of Bartutis' group with him.

Pastor Strackbein wanted to be sure that there was no relationship between Bartutis' group and LC-MS. Pastor Bartutis assured Strackbein that there was no relationship between his group and the Missouri Synod. This group, the Lutheran Church of Cuba (Pastor Bartutis' group), was the group that Strackbein had the most contact with and who had invited the WELS to aid them in their doctrine and teachings. Doctrinally this group was extremely weak. "With the exception of Pastor Bartutis, it could be said that the other two Pastors are Lutheran in name only.¹⁶" The other two Pastors were Pastor Evelio Munoz and Ramon Urrutia.

Pastor Evelion Munoz had formerly been a Pentecostal Pastor but then had been a Lutheran Pastor for over twenty five years. He was 76, had no church, was in poor health, but

¹⁵ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

¹⁶ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

did pass tracts out every once in a while. He conducted services on Sundays for his family. He was for many years the pastor on the Island of Youth.

Pastor Ramon Urrutia, 56, received his education in a Nazarene Seminary and was a Nazarene pastor for 11 years. He replaced Pastor Munoz on the Island of Youth after studying the Augsburg Confessions with Pastor Bartutis. He was not doctrinally sound and his doctrinal practices were still very Nazarene. “It is possible that Bartutis thought something was better than nothing when Pastor Munoz because of declining health, could no longer serve on the Island of Youth.¹⁷” During their visit with Urrutia, Strackbein observed what seemed to be evidence of decision theology with Pastor Urrutia. The positive side to this was that he was willing to be instructed and said that he wanted to be faithful to the Bible but they need help. They asked for help and instruction.

The last Lutheran Church was a new one. It was formed in 1992 by Pablo Martinez. Its name was “The Cuban Christian Lutheran Church.” Pastor Martinez graduated from an interdenominational seminary in Amanas, near Havana. Pablo was originally associated with Pastor Ebenezer’ group but split because of heavy leadership style and over the issue of women in the church. Ebenezer did not have any ordained women but let them lead and teach men. Pablo did not believe that Scripture allowed that. Although Pablo seemed to be conservative in some ways, his ELCA training would probably mean the he had some JEDP theories lurking around. Pastor Martinez had formed six congregations, of which most followed him out of Ebenezer’ group. Pastor Martinez was also invited to attend classes if Strackbein would be able to return to instruct Bartutis and Urrutia.

The second trip to Cuba led to many more contacts and meeting with the Pastors of different groups. The Lord led Strackbein and Monroig to many with the most important

¹⁷ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

message of Christ. On the basis of his second trip Strackbein made the following recommendations.

General recommendations:

1. That the WELS somehow keep in contacts by means of periodic visits with those new mission prospects that God led us to, especially if there is the possibility of starting a new mission.
2. Prayerfully consider the request of Pastors Bartutis, Urrutia, and Carlos the car driver, to come and teach them.
3. In future trips to search for new prospects.

Specific recommendations:

1. That Strackbein or some other Latin American Missionary be allowed to formally teach B.I. and if appropriate, Seminary classes.
2. That visits be made anywhere from one to three times a year depending on finances available. Cost is about \$2,500 for ever two week trip. The major purposes of trips would be to conduct lectures, do research, visit prospects and make new ones. These types of visits would continue until the U.S. economic blockade ends.
3. If the blockade ever ends and it becomes feasible for the WELS to enter Cuba that the WELS establish a B.I. and Seminary in Havana and that the primary mission emphasis be in the province of Pinar del Rio. A secondary emphasis would be in Holguin or Santa Clara.
4. That two trips be made in 1994. The time would be spent instructing the leaders and meeting with a large group of deaf children. The trips would be in May and in August. The trips would also involve visiting house churches. If it is not possible to make two trips the preferred time to make on trip is in August.
5. Radio spots six or seven times a day would be a great way to reach a large number of people. Some radio stations from Miami are picked up in Cuba and are listened to by many.
6. To bring medicine to Cuba. Everything seems to be in order to bring medicine to Cuba legally. The Executive Committee has given the green light and a tentative agreement with the Committee on Relief to pay the costs has been reached.¹⁸

The Lord certainly guided his workers into the fields of Cuba on their second trip. Much more was learned and many more opportunities arose. The doors of the people seem to be opening everywhere and the leaders of the church eager to receive training.

¹⁸ General and Specific goals summarized from: Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

Plan of Action for the WELS in Cuba

One of the results of the first two exploratory trips in Cuba was that the WELS saw an opportunity in the Lord's harvest fields. The question remained, however, of how to pursue and begin work in this new field. Strackbein put together a plan of action for future work in Cuba. There were a number of things to consider when planning to enter into a field that might soon be open. If businesses believed that a door was going to open soon and they were making plans for rapid entry it would be wise for the WELS to pay attention and even attend business conferences where the rapid entry was discussed. Businesses put a great deal of effort and money into finding out where is the best place to locate and why. The WELS could also gain insights from these studies and would serve valuable and save much time. If it was possible, and it was with Cuba, try to identify with a group of people or business and write letters of intent explaining what one would envision the relationship to be in the future. It was also advised that a task force be created or a mission field be assigned the task of making plans for rapid entry. Part of their job would be to keep informed of all the changes happening in the proposed country. WELS would need to identify the state enterprises, ministries and other government entities that would have to be dealt with once the door opened. Part of this would include learning how various U.S. and foreign laws would affect what we planned to do. It would also be important to identify where to locate and why. A financial plan would also have to be developed that could be operative immediately and know how a sudden opening would impact the Synod's existing resources. A team would also have to be ready and on standby waiting to fly in when the door

opened. This team could be a permanent or advance team that would set up shop and rotate coming and going until a final team would be called.

The rapid entry into a mission field that might soon open was involved and much planning is needed. At the same time, patience was required because one did not know when that field would actually open. One can see there was much planning and many questions. So how did this rapid entry fit in with Cuba?

First there was the question of whether to enter Cuba when the U.S. economic blockade was lifted before Castro and Socialism fall or after Castro was gone? One could argue that it would be much too dangerous to enter Cuba after the embargo was lifted but Castro was still in power. Strackbein felt differently. "If the U.S. dropped its boycott tomorrow, many religious denominations would start legal proceedings to get in.¹⁹" Visiting preachers from other countries had been allowed a great amount of freedom to pursue their religious activities as long as the people didn't get involved in illegal politics.

The reason this was brought up was that many people in the Cuban community had felt that the Boycott was working and that Castro couldn't stay in power much longer. Today we know that this is not the case since Castro is still in power and it is ten years later. Strackbein, however, attended a conference in 1993 where there was a general consensus of knowledgeable men that believed that Castro would not go away but would adapt his system in the interest of getting companies to invest in joint ventures with government owned operatives. Another reason that was considered whether WELS wanted to make an attempt to start a mission if the blockade comes down with Castro very much in power is because there was some evidence that Clinton might have found it politically convenient to lower the blockade—so that he could win Florida in the next election. The reason that it might have been lowered was that the Cubans in Miami

¹⁹ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS.

were beginning to feel sympathy and pain for their relatives and friends living in Cuba under the embargo. Strackbein suggested seriously considering making plans for entering into Cuba.

Another decision that had to be made was whether or not the WELS would consider entering Cuba under the sponsorship of a Lutheran body or not. The information gained in the first two visits did not provide enough information whether or not a confessional agreement could be reached. More would have to be discovered before going this route. The negative side of this would be that if the WELS asked favors of a local group in Cuba (to invite us) they might expect favors in return. At the time Cuban law demanded that most foreign entities must form some sort of economic association or partnership even if was as simple as a joint obligation contract. This would have to be done or could be done through law firms that specialize in this. So what was the WELS to do? If this was the only feasible way to enter into Cuba then it seemed to be worth a try. A meeting between the WELS and Pastor Bartutis and Pastor Martinez might have been wise to decide if the WELS could in good conscience use one of their local groups as bridges. So what would the WELS have to do to prepare for such a mission?

Strackbein offered these steps to prepare:

1. Hire a firm that specializes in helping businesses prepare for Cuba entry to get a license from the U.S. Department of the Treasury for setting up a legal humanitarian/religious presence inside of Cuba right now.
2. If we are successful in getting a U.S. license and some religious groups have done this already, ask the same firm to work with the proper Cuban departments to set up a simple joint obligation contract. There are already almost 500 of these joint obligation contracts in existence.

3. If a U.S. license is not forthcoming, we could have letters of intent filed with the Cuban government. Some U.S. companies that I met at the Cuban Conference are having U.S. Cuban law firms register their name and logo with the Cuban Government for the day when the blockade is lifted. We could ask a firm to try and do that for us also.
4. Invite one or both of the Cuban Pastors to the States for talks and if possible, planning sessions...A good place might be in Milwaukee during one of the World Board Meetings.
5. Nail down exactly where we want to go and what type of ministry we want to set up.

The places that the WELS had explored and were possibilities for mission work are: Matanzas; Cien Fuegos and Santa Clara; Las Tunas, Holguin, and Santiago. Each of these cities has different characteristics—pros and cons.

6. The next step was to determine whether an advance team or a pre-called permanent team will go in when the door opens. There would be difficulty with both options. If an advance team went in to set up shop until the permanent team was called, they would probably have to leave ministries where their absence would be felt keenly. Calling a permanent team in advance would make the ministries where they are at uncertain since they would be accepting a call and not know when they would be leaving the call they were at. The advance team difficulties would be diminished somewhat if several advance teams were called on to rotate duty and make trips once every three months. There were a number of men who volunteered to be involved in the initial entry team. They are, Pastors Ralph Martens in Miami, Pastor Retberg in

Michigan, Pastor Philip Strackbein in Colombia, Pastor Carl Leyrer in Colombia, Pastor Tim Satorius in Puerto Rico, Pastor Tom Zimdars in Puerto Rico and Pastor John Strackbein. The proposal was that given if the WELS would choose to go this route is that the men would be divided into teams of two. These teams would take turns traveling to Cuba for two weeks returning every two months. At the same time, the Executive Committee could start the calling process for a permanent missionary who would serve a three year exploratory call. If this plan was to be adopted by the Board, an advance team coordinator should be named.

7. Whether or not an advance team was to be contemplated, a financial plan should also be put into effect. How would one plan financially for such an endeavor if one is not sure where or when the money will be spent? There are many considerations that had to be made when considering financial matters. Could a house or car be bought and how much would they cost? If Castro fell how would these prices change? The entry teams would have a lot of research to do. What was important is that some kind of fund be made available so that when the time came WELS wouldn't have to put the whole project on hold until funds became available. The cost of such a plan was estimated to be about \$70,000 per missionary not counting the move. The initial entry missionaries would each cost about \$25,000.
8. The eighth item that was to be done was to draw up a timeline for such action.
June 1994—Acquire a lawyer to start the paperwork for application with the U.S. Department of Treasury for a license to do Humanitarian and or religious work.

July 1994—A large shipment of medicines are shipped to Lutheran doctors via an organization that has a U.S. treasury license to do so. (Pending approval from the Relief Committee)

Late August 1994—Trip made to Cuba by John Strackbein and Manuel Monroig for two weeks. Trip would entail visiting contacts, giving doctrinal papers, exploration of potential areas, and delivering medicine.

October or November 1994—Invite Martinez or Bartutis or both to Milwaukee for discussions with the Executive Committee for L.A.

December 1994—Broadcast one or two minute spots on radio from a Miami station if the Home Mission Board is willing to help fund it for the sake of the Miami Cubans.

January 1995—Make a trip to Cuba to specifically find out how the Cuban government provides housing to those foreigners who will be coming to Cuba after the embargo. Find a reputable Cuban Lawyer who can work with one of the Stateside law firms.

February 1995—Start the U.S. firm working on registering the WELS logo in Cuba working through the Lawyer found in January.

April 1995—update the plan.

August 1995—Make another trip to Cuba to check on registration process and keep in touch with mission contacts already made.²⁰

Was Cuba going to a field into which the WELS wanted to venture? These plans began to be implemented and work began to do more research of Cuba. More research was gained and progress made on John Strackbein's third exploratory trip.

²⁰ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Second Mission Exploration by the WELS. Points 1-8 are not verbatim from the initial report but reflect the importance of each item.

Third Exploratory Trip to Cuba

Cuba is a land of spiritual darkness. Thick darkness covers the people. Most of the people are not baptized. The Christian churches of Cuba are a fraction of what they were before the Revolution. Christians who valued the true Word of God and who stood up for it have been persecuted. According to governmental sources more than nine out of ten Cubans are not Christians. The light of God's grace has not completely disappeared in Cuba. It is one of the nations which is coming back to the Glory of the Lord in His Word. Castro has been much more lenient towards Christians in recent times and many Christian churches are growing by leaps and bounds. By God's grace the WELS has had the opportunity to bring the Word of God to Cuba three times in the last two years. The response to that glorious light has been and continues to be amazing.²¹

John Strackbein made his Third trip to Cuba and was accompanied by Manuel Monroig and Pastor Lawrence Retberg. The thirst for the Gospel was very evident on this journey to Cuba. One saw the frustration and anxiety by the number of Cubans fleeing to the United States on home made boats--the number of people was great as the people left families and relatives behind. Where did God fit in this picture—thousands of Cubans fleeing their current lives? Some of the people told our WELS representatives they felt that God was punishing them for abandoning him. The desperation in the Cubans' lives is perhaps the reason for their great thirst for the Gospel.

The travels on this visit were quite extensive. The goals were to visit the previous contacts, to make new contacts, and to visit the leaders, particularly with Pastor Bartutis and Pastor Urrutia on the Island of Youth to study doctrines. The WELS team was able to make the visit to the Island of Youth. They also made visits to many other cities. Allow me to highlight some of the exciting visits to specific cities.

The visit to La Santa Cruz was made to deliver medicine to the clinic of a Lutheran doctor Strackbein met on his first trip. The doctor was using books and materials received by mail from Strackbein to instruct several families in his area.

²¹ Strackbein, John. The Lord's Glory is Shining in Darkness! Third WELS Exploratory Trip to Cuba.

The trip to Las Tunas was one of the more exciting visits. A man by the name of Pablo Delgado had invited the WELS to visit him. Since the first contact, made on the first trip, Pablo had received adult information courses. Pablo, after viewing the Communicating Christ video, was very excited and wanted to begin studying with Pastor Bartutis, the leader of The Lutheran Church of Cuba. During the visits to homes in Las Tunas the homes were filled with people eager to hear God's Word as they crowded into homes to see the videos. The thirst for the Gospel was clearly evident.

Throughout all of the visits the need for the Gospel was evident. During the trip seven children were baptized. Over 300 saw the Spanish version of "Soul Search" and various other videos. The WELS team gathered over 85 names of prospects who were interested in hearing more of the Gospel.

In Strackbein's first two trips he discovered three denominations in Cuba. They were, The Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Cuban Church and The Lutheran Church of Cuba. The first church was affiliated with the LC-MS and its President was Rev. Ebanks. The second church broke away from Ebanks over leadership and doctrinal questions and its leader was Rev. Pablo Martinez. Since Strackbein's previous visit Pablo had left Cuba and was not going to come back until the government changed. It seemed that at this point WELS had lost contact with the second group. The third church was led by Pastor Bartutis. Pastor Bartutis and Urrutia were the only full time workers (in the LCC) and depend on several lay leaders, two doctors, and one ex-seminary student to keep things going while they weren't around at the congregations. An interesting note is that a young ministerial student, Pablo Martinez, had joined the church. He was in his third year of training at a Catholic Seminary when he was assigned to participate in a debate (in favor) of Martin Luther against two

other seminary students who would argue against Luther. The debate led him into the Bible and out of the Seminary.

One of the goals that was mentioned was to continue to aid in the instruction of these men. All of these men realized their need to continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding. "One of the goals was to respond to this desire to grow confessionally and to give them a chance to study issues that they really hadn't looked at in depth because of their simple struggle to survive."²² The doctrine studies on the Island of Youth led these men to grow in their desire so much so that they planned to gather together in Havana with Bartutis to study further. The Lord continued to bless the work, carrying his Word to lost souls, and creating a desire to feed knowledge and faith of others.

An update on the search for a law firm to register the WELS in Cuba was made after this trip. After searching for a lawyer Strackbein contacted Turner and Whisenand. Mr. Whisenand, according to San Juan Star, was one of the top experts on Cuba in the country. The proposed amount of \$5,000 for a lawyer would not be enough since Whisenand was asking for \$7,500. On the basis of his expertise the fee seemed to be reasonable. A request was made to hire Mr. Whisenand.

What other plans were to be considered after this third trip? The WELS wanted to continue to visit Cuba and the contacts that had been made. This could have become more difficult since President Clinton tightened the blockade during the third trip. It would now be required of the WELS to send the letter of invitation from the Lutheran Church of Cuba directly to Washington to obtain permission to travel to Cuba.

²² Strackbein, John. The Lord's Glory is Shining in Darkness! Third WELS Exploratory Trip to Cuba.

Strackbein also recommended increasing the number of visits made to Cuba with the goals of providing more materials and eventually set up Christian Information centers in Havana, The Island of Youth, Pinar del Rio, and Las Tunas. With Information Centers in place the leaders in Cuba could continue to instruct prospects and have periodic visits from WELS representatives. The Information Centers would serve the leaders and home congregations until such time as a trained pastor could be called. The advantage of this idea was that it could be put into practice even if Communism were to stay in place. When the time would come to introduce seminary training, WELS representatives could travel in to do the instruction.

This trip into Cuba was blessed by the Lord as more and more people were hearing about the Savior, their Savior. Strackbein writes of this trip:

I thank the Lord for the opportunities that have been graciously given to do research and to share Jesus to so many people desperately in need of what He alone can offer. It is a privilege like no other. I found it truly ironic that so many people were trying so hard to get out while I was trying so hard to get in. Maybe that will change. I pray that one day the people who feel so desperate will turn from man-made solutions and the call of Miami. Through the proper preaching of sin and grace they will find that Jesus and His Word, not Miami, is the light shining in darkness. He and He alone has what they truly need. May God grant them grace and mercy!²³

Before the fourth trip to Cuba took place the WELS was working on the legal details for the work in Cuba, namely working on a joint venture with the Lutheran Church of Cuba. With respect to the joint venture the WELS would: Make periodic visits to Cuba to train its church leaders in Doctrinal Theology, Historical Theology, Biblical Theology, Pastoral Theology and missions; work toward establishing a Bible Institute and Seminary with resident professors; work side by side with the Lutheran Church of Cuba in the area of Evangelism; offer humanitarian aid, in the form of medicine and health care, on individual basis and need; provide Christian counsel

²³ Strackbein, John. The Lord's Glory is Shining in Darkness! Third WELS Exploratory Trip to Cuba.

when requested. The Lutheran Church of Cuba would: pledge to accept and remain faithful in doctrine and practice to the Bible as the only inspired and unerring Word of God; uphold the Lutheran Confessions as the true and proper understanding of the Bible; have all present and future Pastors and lay leaders of the Lutheran Church of Cuba complete the Institute and Seminary courses; arrange for Cuban families to allow classes for 4-5 persons per class to be held in their homes or arrange for facilities (at the sole expense of the Lutheran Church of Cuba) in which to hold classes. This was a big step in what would be the continuing involvement of the WELS on the Island of Cuba. This proposal, however, was still a draft and matters were still to be discussed with the Lutheran Church of Cuba. This joint venture, however, God willing, would allow the WELS to continue their work in the ripe fields of Cuba.

The Fourth Trip to Cuba Jan. 29-Feb. 12, 1995

John Strackbein traveled to Cuba alone on his fourth journey but plans were being made for a rotation of WELS representatives to travel to Cuba. The hunger for God's Word was once again evident. People were now able to get a hold of Bible and read them. Many people wanted to know what the truth was and why God had let the people of Cuba suffer. There were other people who had never heard God's Word and who had never read it. Certainly the need for God's Word was evident and the Lord blessed the messenger of his Word as he again traveled to these harvest fields of Cuba.

By this time the WELS had begun to associate itself and even begin discussion over a joint venture with the Lutheran Church of Cuba. The church had some problems but was growing in size and its confessional position. One of the reasons for its growth was that the groups that were being served by Pastor Pablo Martinez were now requesting Pastor Bartutis to minister to them. This was because, as mentioned earlier, Pastor Martinez fled to Miami. The

church was growing confessionally because the lay leaders as well as Pastors Urrutia (on the Island of Youth) and Bartutis were seriously studying the Book of Concord and Mueller's Dogmatics. The fact that the church was becoming more confessional, however, also led to some problems. Three prospective leaders left the church because of doctrinal differences related to the real presence and infant baptism.

Another purpose of this fourth trip was to offer Bible Studies in areas where there appeared to be doctrinal weaknesses and reformed influences. Strackbein spent four days directing Bible Studies in Old Havana, one day with a leader in La Fortuna, and two days with Pastor Ramon Urrutia and three Reformed Bible Institute Students on the Island of Youth. The studies created much discussion on justification, sanctification, the inerrancy of Scripture, fellowship, the role of women, millennialism, and conversion. In addition to the Bible Classes many visitations were made to previous contacts. With Strackbein in Cuba and the use of a car for transportation, Pastor Bartutis had the opportunity to travel with Strackbein and visit many people he otherwise would not have had the chance to visit for some time. During the visits six children, three babies, and ten adults were baptized by Bartutis. Strackbein was asked and baptized Bartutis' grand daughter.

The principle goal in these visits was a church that was based 100% on God's Word and would be able to fully determine what is right and wrong in doctrine and practice. Another goal was to help train people who are prospective leaders and possibly successors to the aging Bartutis. Strackbein gave a description of things at the time of his visit:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cuba has fourteen official churches with about 713 adult baptized members. They have two active Pastors. Pastor Ramon Urrutia leads four of the churches and Pastor Bartutis ten. Many of these are in the slow process of taking instructions and are not yet taking the Lord's Supper. In fact in some of the churches simply is not offered because the members haven't received instruction. Lack of transportation and large distances forces all

instruction courses to go at a snail's pace. Some of these groups have poorly trained lay leaders who gather the congregations for Bible reading and prayer under the supervision of Pastor Bartutis. Some do not. In addition to these fourteen official churches there are a multitude of Christians in various homes who belong to no church but rely on Pastor Bartutis for Spiritual guidance when he comes to visit. Several hundred people fall into this category.²⁴

The time to act in Cuba was ripe but the law firm working on getting permission from the U.S. government for missionaries to work full time in Cuba said it could take over a year to investigate such a venture. For this reason Strackbein recommended that team of Latin American Missionaries be sent to Cuba every second month for two weeks at a time. They would assist Pastor Bartutis with the many house churches and countless prospects. The missionaries would begin by teaching the entire Communicating Christ series. After the completion of that course studies could be offered in Dogmatics, the confessions and homiletics. After the daytime classes with prospective leaders, the missionaries would travel and aid Pastor Bartutis in evangelism visits. Pastor Bartutis' house could serve as the base of operations for a rotating group of WELS representatives to carry out their work. The plan was to send groups of two missionaries until a \$25,000 donation made by Kingdom Workers for Cuban Mission Work would be used up. This plan would help the WELS in the training Cubans to evangelize and faithfully lead other Cubans.

The WELS was starting to set in place what would be the method of doing mission work in Cuba. These plans to send in teams of two missionaries to instruct the leaders and guide them in their organizing of a national church would make several minor changes through the following few years. This would be, however, the best method of working in such a country.

The Fifth Trip to Cuba July/August 1995

²⁴ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Fourth Mission Exploration by the WELS.

The first three trips to Cuba were exploratory trips made to find out information and make contacts. Beginning with the fourth visit the trips were still filled with new information and learning but they began to be trips in which not as much exploring was taking place and more instruction was taking place.

The fifth trip to Cuba was made by Rev. Paul Hartman and Rev. Lawrence Retberg. Pastor Bartutis' house served as the base of operations where ten days were spent teaching *Curso de Doctrina Christiana* (Course on Christian Doctrine) and finishing a Bible study on Daniel. The classes were attended faithfully by some and others attended some but not all of the classes. Time was also spent organizing the books that have been brought in by WELS representatives. The purpose for spending time to organize the books was twofold. The first reason was to find out just what books and materials were in Cuba. The second was to help the Cubans have a library which could be utilized by the leaders. Two weekends were spent making evangelism calls to eleven families in Havana and a few communities in Jaruco which is located about 50 miles east of Havana.

Again the Lord blessed the trip to Cuba as instruction took place and evangelism calls were made. One of the outcomes of this trip was that Pastor Bartutis, Pastor Hartman, and Pastor Retberg established a plan for the Latin American Missionaries to visit Cuba from October 1995 through August of 1996. I have noted plans that have already been proposed. My purpose in listing all these plans is to see that no one plan is perfect and plans change as the situation changes. Beginning work in a new field is challenging and adaptations are made so that the Lord's Work can be carried out to the best of our abilities.

The Plan for Latin American Missionaries from October 1995 through August 1996 was the following:

The Situation

1. The Lutheran Church of Cuba has about 22 congregations that are becoming organized. Among them are 68 places where "casacultos" (house-meetings) are conducted. There may be as many as 200 families.
2. There are two pastors: Roberto Bartutis in Havana and Ramon Urrutia on the Island of Youth.
3. At this time most of the members are new and need basic instruction in doctrine and leadership. Latin American missionaries would probably call many of them prospects or nonmember souls under care.
4. There are leaders in all the congregations but they need basic instruction in doctrine and leadership.

The Greatest Needs

1. Instruction of the members in basic doctrine. Confirmation after completing the course is recommended.
2. Instruction of the leaders in the same doctrine course and basic church leadership skills.
3. Organization of the congregations at the local level so that there are weekly worship services and Bible studies.

To Satisfy These Needs

1. Each member should see "Soul Search" or its equivalent and take an adult information course (Curso de doctrina cristiana, Escudrinad las Escrituras, Que dice la Biblia? Or Las maravillas de Dios).
2. The leaders in each location should be taught how to conduct a simple worship service and how to choose hymns, Scripture readings and liturgical propers. They should be taught how to preach a published sermon and how to conduct a Bible study. Simple hymnals should be provided for each family.

Missionary Trips

Each team should expect to spend two weeks in Cuba. To satisfy the "greatest needs" we propose that the team give four intensive three day seminars. Each seminar would last 10 hours a day. Two additional hours of training should be provided for the leaders in each congregation. This would require twelve days of 12 hours of teaching for the missionary teams.

Between Missionary Trips

1. Pastor Bartutis would organize the work in Cuba by setting up class locations and arranging for housing, food and transportation.
2. He and the leaders in the Havana area will meet weekly until October to study the Gospel According to Luke, *The Monk who Conquered Rome* and the Martin Luther Movie.
3. Bartutis and other leaders will care for the congregations making sure they have Bibles, *Doctrinas basicas*, and *The Life of Christ*. They will encourage the casacultos to meet for worship and study

Material to be Brought to Cuba by Missionaries

1. 10 kilos of medicine per missionary.
2. Sufficient copies of the Adult Information Course they intend to teach in each location.
3. Simple Bible studies for groups after they have attended an adult information class.
4. Limited economic assistance to be distributed on a need basis or for services rendered to missionaries.

This plan again would focus on training those whom contact had already been established. It focuses on training all the people rather than focusing on the leaders.

Sixth trip to Cuba October 1, 1995-October 15, 1995

The sixth trip to Cuba was made by Pastor John Strackbein and Pastor Tim Satorius. This trip was much like the others. Time was spent visiting prospects, house churches and instructing leaders. The priority according the Retberg/Hartman plan was to instruct prospects and members. Throughout the visits the house church leaders were encouraged to go through the basic Christian instruction courses with the members and prospects. The leaders, in some cases, did teach the lessons and did a fine job...showing growth and leadership skills. The leaders were also instructed on how to conduct the liturgy and lead worship services and in some cases were able to put their learning into practice in some of the house churches. On the Island of Youth the growth was visible as Pastor Urrutia was making use of the instructional videos showing them to many others. This trip once again saw the Lord's blessing as baptisms were performed in more than one location, church services were conducted, prospects were visited and many hear the Word of God.

Two days before Strackbein and Satorius were to leave Pastor Bartutis informed them that the Lutheran Church of Cuba wanted to ask for fellowship or at least a declaration of what exactly the relationship was between the two. Strackbein notes that "As a matter of fact we

already are practicing fellowship with them by virtue of our doing mission work together with them, accepting invitations from them to work in Cuba, and by helping their leaders and members grow in their understanding of God's Word.²⁵ Pastor Bartutis wanted to write a letter to the WELS asking for an explanation of where they stood with the WELS. This letter was signed by the Governing Board of the Lutheran Church of Cuba but it was later discovered that the Governing Board is really only a board in name and really just go along with what Pastor Bartutis suggested. For this reason it seemed that the letter was premature and did not carry the weight of the Lutheran Church of Cuba. The letter was brought to the WELS.

One other issue that surfaced during this trip was the request for scholarship grants for the students. The encouragement was made to the LCC that each congregation should be responsible for their own students and pastors. Money issues came up often. The WELS believed that it would be best to let a church that did not have outside help and survived for many years continue to survive on its own. The exception to this would be the materials that the WELS was bringing in to help the Lutheran Church of Cuba become more confessional (Bibles, hymnbooks, doctrine books). If the WELS would have started handing out money to everyone who asked for it, the people would have seen the visitations by the WELS as their jackpot. Strackbein encouraged future WELS representatives to use discretion when dealing with money.

The following recommendations were made after the sixth trip. The first recommendation made was that the WELS meet with Pastors Bartutis and Urrutia, the two Pastors of the Lutheran Church of Cuba. It was recommended that a plan, similar to that of the Retberg/Hartman plan be adopted for 1997 or that the WELS call the first full time missionary to Cuba. This would involve stationing a missionary in Puerto Rico and traveling back and forth to Cuba. The focus of the 1997 plan would be to strengthen leaders since the 1996 plan was

²⁵ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Sixth Missionary Journey by the WELS! Pg. 10

focused on strengthening the house churches. It was recommended that the WELS sign the joint agreement so that this document could be presented to the lawyers and be used to explain to the U.S. Department of Treasury of the WELS work in Cuba. Other recommendations that were made: not to offer grants to the students and that the mission team bring medicines.

Following the Retberg/Hartman plan for 1996 Strackbein encouraged missionaries on what not to do and what to do in Cuba.

What not to do:

1. Do not give or promise money to help the leaders live or support themselves.
2. Do not give your opinion of Castro, his politics, the blockade, etc.
3. Do not sign or promise to sign invitations for individuals who want to leave Cuba for a month and then return. If such people change their minds and stay in the U.S. the officials who are deciding whether or not to let us enter in Cuba full time may turn a cold shoulder to our application.
4. Do not take pictures of soldiers, army installations, Castro, etc. Feel free to take pictures of anything else. If in doubt, ask Pastor Bartutis.
5. Do not offer any of the ten leaders scholarships or hope of scholarships in the future at the end of the blockade. If they want to study more with the missionaries they will have to do so after work or with the support of their personal families and church.
6. Do not promise money or rent for church structures or worship center homes. Right now that type of financial commitment would have to be approved by the Treasury Department. If a fantastic offer comes up that is not illegal from the U.S. standpoint, include it in your report. The Executive Committee will have to decide on it.

What to do:

Share the Gospel. Pray and sing with them. Give them lots of love. They are little lambs who have faced all kinds of religious back stabbers and false prophets, a famine of God's Word and much governmental persecution.²⁶

There was still much work to be done in Cuba and, God willing, the WELS would be instrumental in helping the Lutheran Church of Cuba become an organized confessional church.

Seventh Trip to Cuba December 3-17, 1995

The seventh trip to Cuba was made by Ron Baerbock and Tim Satorius. The trip involved visiting house churches and instructing leaders. There was one update since the last

²⁶ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Sixth Missionary Journey by the WELS! Pg. 30

visit. During the sixth visit there was a new prospective group in Matanzas. This group, lead by Carlos Diaz, is growing and wanted to join the Lutheran Church of Cuba. Pastor Bartutis welcomed the group although not much doctrine was discussed before they were accepted. Carlos Diaz and Ariel, the youth leader, both came and attended classes in Havana. Many visits were made by Baerbock and Satorius although the schedule was not exactly as planned. This happened often and missionaries needed to be flexible upon arrival.

As the WELS missionaries continued to travel to Cuba it became evident that the leaders would also need more training. Visits would include the lessons in the house churches but some extra time would be spent with leaders. There are about ten leaders with some responsibility and four others who had expressed great interest in becoming leaders. The task that the WELS continued to do and planned to do was great. The Lord continued to bless the work as visits were made and more and more young Christians want to step into leadership roles and guide the church houses.

The Decision for a Full Time Missionary in Cuba

Following a recommendation made by John Strackbein made after his sixth trip. In January of 1996 the Executive Committee for Latin America decided to accept the recommendation that a full time missionary be called to do work in Cuba. This recommendation was sent on to the WELS World Mission Priority Committee. (I could not locate any of the information between the time this was submitted to the time that the actual decision to elevate Cuba to Mission status and to call the first full time missionary was made) The decision was made and a job description was devised. The job description shows the shift in focus of the WELS work in Cuba. The focus would now be on instructing the leaders and Pastors.

The Job Description was put together by John Strackbein who had been vital in getting the

WELS started in Cuba, had made the most trips and had conducted much of the work in Cuba:

1. The Person

Ideally the person should be single. If married, he should have no children at home. It would be helpful but not necessary if either the missionary or his wife was musically trained. If the U.S. government denies our petition for a full time two year presence, consider calling a Canadian, an Australian or a man from some other field. Another possibility is to call a professor for a one or two year sabbatical. If a Pastoral candidate accepts a call there may be lay couples willing to learn Spanish and serve at their own expense as a partner to the missionary and his wife.

2. The Call

What are the reasons for making this call, Puerto Rico 4 if his primary work is not in Puerto Rico? Why not call him Cuba 1? If he was called as Cuba 1 the Missionary to Cuba could be given the responsibility of Mission Coordinator along with the authority to open a separate bank account in Puerto Rico. As Mission Coordinator he would keep his own set of books and make monthly financial reports to the committee. He would also be paid the extra \$50 per month that goes with this responsibility.

The call could be permanent or a one to two year sabbatical. If possible it should be full time. If you have trouble getting single people, or foreign pastors, a second option would be to call a man to work six months out of the year in Cuba and six months in Puerto Rico doing Evangelism outreach and Mass Media work in Puerto Rico. Under this system the wife and children if any could find a more stable life along with schools and their own home.

If the call goes out to someone who does not know Spanish, I would encourage letting the current coordinators, Pastor Retberg and myself remain in charge until the new man arrives in Cuba. If no one accepts the call before Oct. 1996, it would be advisable for us or for someone you would appoint to start organizing the rotation of missionaries for 1997. Since most L.A. missionaries will have had experience going into Cuba, I would recommend one man visits for two weeks every single month. This would involve six missionaries going twice. Our actual time in Cuba would increase from a total of three months during 1996 to six months in 1997. The whole operation could be canceled the moment a new man is ready to take over.

3. The Mission:

--To train as many leaders as possible to serve the various house churches.

--Model, supervise and help the available leaders to do Bible classes, preaching and evangelism.

--Your mission is not to take charge but rather to counsel, help and follow when possible the President of the Lutheran Church of Cuba. Your goal is to use the means of grace to strengthen the leaders and house churches as well as start new house churches when faithful leaders are ready to take charge of them under a pastor's supervision. Part of your work will be to periodically visit all house

churches with the President of the Lutheran Church of Cuba. The Lutheran Church of Cuba is not very organized. In some ways it is very weak and battle weary. One of its strengths however, is that it is and has been indigenous for some time. Do everything in your power to keep it that way if at all possible. I think you will find that the Cubans will be tempted to do everything in their power to have the WELS do most things for them. In other words they will be tempted to become non-self supporting, non self governing, non self disciplining and non self propagating. Since you will be much better trained than any Lutheran leader in Cuba and since you will have much more money, you will be tempted to give in to the Cubans' attempts to have you take charge, make the decisions, do all the work of evangelism, preaching, financing, and classes. Resist the temptation. Help them to resist the temptation.

4. Operational Base

Until permission is granted to live permanently in Cuba for two years you will need to stay in Pastor Bartutis' house in Havana, Cuba along with your wife. The house is nice and your room will be air-conditioned. The family that lives there will feed you. The rent will be \$500 per month. If this is unacceptable you could stay at Hotel St. Johns for \$35.00 per night. Remember however, you cannot spend more than \$100 per day. If the U.S. treasury Department gives you permission to reside in Cuba, you will be able to look for rental housing on your own. If you get permission to stay permanently in Cuba you should be able to receive your salary in cash through Canadian banks or through various companies that specialize in transferring money to people in Cuba. In an emergency you can have the same company send you cash now.

There are three hurdles to a two year residency in Cuba without traveling to Puerto Rico. The hurdles are getting money to the missionary, the U.S. blockade and Cuban opposition. Using the Methodist bank account will hopefully solve the first. Permission from the U.S. Department of Treasury will solve the second. Sending medicine to Cuba, getting WELS registered with Cuba or getting Cuba to give our missionaries religious visas for two year periods is the solution to the third. We are in progress of solving hurdles two and three.

In the meantime, until the U.S. government grants permission to WELS for a more permanent presence or until the WELS agrees to send your requisition to the incorporate Canadian Lutheran churches so that they can officially send it to you, you will probably have to travel to San Juan every month or two to get a new supply of cash as well as a new general or specific license from the U.S. allowing you to travel to Cuba. To help you in this matter one of the missionaries in San Juan could be designated by the Executive Committee to arrange for the travel vouchers, visas and U.S. license requirements in advance so that when you come back to Puerto Rico you will not need much more than two or three days to stock up on supplies, books, materials, and take care of personal business. While you are in San Juan, Puerto Rico we could ask the local church if it would let you use its chapel. There is a new two bed apartment upstairs. If for some reason this apartment would not be available you would be welcome to stay with one of the missionaries or utilize a moderately priced hotel. If you can find a way to stay in Havana, Cuba legally, for longer periods of time, with little or no financial inconvenience, than great. If for some reason a license to travel back into Cuba is

not granted after one of your trips back to San Juan, we would ask you to use your time canvassing for the various Lutheran Puerto Rican churches until the problem is solved. By the way even if you do get a two year residency permit by the U.S. Government, without a Cuban religious visa, you will still have to get a Cuban tourist visa which lasts only for five months. That will mean a trip out of Cuba to renew it once it has expired. We are working on getting the WELS registered with the Cuban government but it may take time and we may not succeed.

The whole process sounds complicated, difficult and different. It may be, but it is not impossible. No one ever said doing mission work would be easy. If the Lord wants it to happen it will happen. It helps if we have a positive, "can do" attitude. When one door is shut, try another, don't give in. The opportunities and blessings that await us in Cuba are worth it.

5. Transportation

Transportation in Cuba, at least to start with will be by Eduardo Forte and Carlos Arza at the rate of \$25.00 per day. They will provide the cars, do the driving and pay for any mechanical repairs that are necessary. If permission is granted by the U.S. government to reside in Cuba you will be able to buy a new Japanese car. Your car budget is \$20,000. For the few days you will have to be in Puerto Rico for U.S. license and Cuba visa renewal, you will have to rent a car.

6. Family Visits

I would like to propose the following to the Executive Committee. If the missionary and his wife have high school children, they should be allowed to go to the mission house every Christmas for two or three weeks as well as every summer for two months on non furlough years. In a normal situation a missionary gets to have his children visit during Christmas and every summer that is not a furlough year. As of now the U.S. Government will not allow anyone except the licensed members to enter Cuba. Without this stipulation High School children may find themselves with no place to go unless someone is generous enough to take them in. If the missionary is single or has no High School children he would not need to take non furlough vacations.

7. Missionary Help

You are to organize and supervise two or three two week Latin American Missionary visits per year.

8. M.A.P. Medicine

Become a distributor of MAP International. To keep the government of Cuba happy, periodically order shipments of medicines to the hospitals and clinics of your choice. Do this as you see the need whether or not you stay full time or travel in and out every month or two. The U.S. has given WELS a license to transport \$15,000 worth of medicine every year. M.A.P. International donates free medicine for a small administration charge. There are airlines that will transport it free of charge. Doing this should go a long way to helping WELS register its logo in Cuba.

9. What to Bring

You will not be able to bring much of anything. Whatever you need will have to be bought in Cuba. All your personal belonging will have to be stored in the

States. If it is decided to rent a home for you in San Juan you could store your things there. I doubt however, whether you will be in San Juan long enough to warrant renting a house. You will be able to take in forty pounds per trip if you travel on Cubana Airline. You can go over the weight limit for a fine but not by much.

10. Job Blessings

The work in Cuba is new, exciting. The thirst for the Word after years without it is very great. You will find yourself present at many baptisms doing countless classes and visits. Although the work, Communism, may bring up fearful thoughts it is not dangerous to be in Cuba so long as you stay clear of politics and anti government activities. The need is very great for the Gospel you offer. I pray that you will find great joy in this field.²⁷

I wanted to include this description because it shows that the job would not be an easy one and would not be a regular one. The WELS did not know exactly where the missionary would be and the fact that the situation could have changes as the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba changed made this call unique. Another reason for including this rather extensive look at the job description was to note that it was going to take someone who had a great zeal to spread God's Word and someone special to conduct such a ministry.

In April of 1996 The Executive Committee for Latin America called Roger Sprain to be the Missionary to Puerto Rico, Cuba Specialist. Roger Sprain accepted the call and would begin the transition to his new call. During this time of transition for Sprain missionaries continued their trips to evangelize, nurture, and instruct the brothers and sisters in Cuba.

Trips Continue

The eighth trip to Cuba was made by Tom Zimdars and Paul Hartman. The trip was from February 1 through February 15, 1996. They continued to meet with house church groups, instruct, and teach leaders. No new real issues were reported.

²⁷ Strackbein, John. Job Description: Cuba Call.

The ninth trip to Cuba was made by John Strackbein and his brother Philip Strackbein.

This trip was made from March 28 through April 11, 1996. John Strackbein gave a general overview of their trip.

Our ninth trip into Cuba showed what will be the focus of this report, namely that although there are problems, the blessings and growth since the first trip have far exceeded our greatest expectations. In March 1993, when our first trip was made, there were two poorly trained, and very poorly equipped Lutheran Pastors struggling to keep 350 Christians scattered through out Cuba in contact with the Word. Today, three years later, there are 750 to 800 people looking to the Lutheran Church of Cuba to bring them nourishment from God's Word. The major difference is that now these two pastors have seven faithful leaders who not only are tireless in their study of God's Word, but who also have become zealous missionaries with groups of their own preparing for confirmation.²⁸

The Lord had certainly blessed the work that had been done in Cuba and blessed this trip. One new happening was the new Helms, Burton Law. This would tighten the blockade. John Strackbein did not believe, however, that it would affect this trip but noted that it may be necessary in the future to get a license directly from the Department of Treasury of the United States. The tenth trip to Cuba was also made by John Strackbein with Ernest Zimdars accompanying him. Strackbein included in this report a review of what the past goals and plans have been in Cuba. These plans, of course, would change with the acceptance of the call by Roger Sprain. Strackbein notes that several factors had been an influence in the work the WELS has done since 1993. The first is the political situation. The political situation between the U.S. and Cuba had always raised the question of how long we (WELS) would be able to continue making trips to Cuba. The uncertainty of this question had led the WELS to bring in as much literature (Bibles, hymnbooks, lessons, doctrine books, etc.) as possible to help the church leaders grow in the Word. The reason for this was if the WELS had to leave and could not return to Cuba the Lutheran Church of Cuba would have materials with which they could

²⁸ Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Ninth Missionary Journey by the WELS! Pg. 1

continue to grow. For this reason the WELS has also modeled teaching and evangelism to the various house churches but left most of the training and teaching of the local members to the pastors and leaders of the national church. Another factor that had entered into the equation for the WELS plan and goals was that the WELS was not able to visit very often. Up until January of 1996 only three visits made each year. This did not leave sufficient time to instruct, visit and teach all the Lutherans in Cuba. Finally there was the age of Pastor Bartutis. In 1996 he was over seventy years old and there was no one ready to replace him. If Bartutis would have died we would have lost our invitation to come to Cuba. We can thank the Lord that from 1993 to 1996 he has brought forward several capable leaders. The urgency to train them was still present.²⁹

These circumstances led the WELS to increase its presence in 1996. WELS missionaries would visit Cuba in teams of two every two months. The plan had been followed as best as possible but with the difficulties of doing work in Cuba the schedule and plan was not perfect and could not be kept perfectly. The Lord, however, continued to bless the work.³⁰

Roger Sprain's call acceptance would cancel some of the missionary trips that were scheduled in October and December. Sprain planned to be in Puerto Rico near the end of August and would get settled in a rented apartment during September. He would accompany Strackbein in October and December and begin his work in Cuba. Sprain also indicated that beginning in January of 1997 he would like to travel to Cuba for a month at a time and return to Puerto Rico

²⁹ Information gathered from: Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Tenth Missionary Journey. Pgs. 4-6.

³⁰ Information gathered from: Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Tenth Missionary Journey. Pgs. 4-6.

for two to three weeks and then return to Cuba for another month. This would give him time to restock on supplies and prepare more studies and classes.³¹

Strackbein concludes his report with his daily journal of his visit. It included the documentation of his visit with the house churches and instruction of leaders.

The eleventh trip was made by Goeff Kieta and Paul Hartman and was from August 7-23 of 1996. The men continued to instruct and encourage. It was apparent that some of the leaders were still doctrinally weak and the instruction in Doctrine needs to continue and be reinforced. The one notable incident on this trip was a visit with a lawyer in Cuba to try and attain permission for a two missionary team to reside in Cuba for two years. The U.S. Government gave permission for the two missionaries and now all that was needed was the approval of the Cuban Government. This, however, was something that would not be easy since the Lutheran Church of Cuba was not registered with the Government in Cuba. This would be the biggest road block to actually being able to register and live in Cuba.³² The WELS continued to travel to Cuba through invitations made by the Lutheran Church of Cuba. The WELS did not attain permission to live in Cuba yet continued to travel under invitations and tourist visas.

The trip by Kieta and Hartman was the last trip made before Roger Sprain began his full time work in Cuba. Pastor Sprain continued to serve the WELS until 2000. During his service he traveled back and forth to Cuba throughout the years one month at a time. Steve Wagenknecht, a 1996 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary graduate, was also called to work with Sprain in Cuba. Beginning in 1997 the plan for Cuba continued to follow what the WELS had been doing in Cuba with an added emphasis on training leaders. The WELS would continue to do outreach with the Gospel to those house churches that were already present and new ones that

³¹ Information gathered from: Strackbein, John. To Cuba with Love! Tenth Missionary Journey. Pgs. 7-8.

³² Kieta Goeff and Paul Hartman. Trip to Cuba: August 7-23, 1996. Trip #11.

were being formed. The WELS would also focus on the training of leaders for the Lutheran Church of Cuba. This was done when the WELS in 1997 the WELS began a preseminary, Bible Institute type course for about 18 leaders. This was led and taught by Sprain and Wagenknecht. The WELS would also guide and assist when necessary the organization and structure building of the Lutheran Church of Cuba.

In 2000 the WELS continued its work in Cuba with Pastors Lawrence Retberg and Nathan Wagenknecht. They continued where Pastors Roger Sprain and Steve Wagenknecht left off. The work in Cuba continued to be blessed by the Lord as Pastor Retberg made trips to Cuba from Michigan and Wagenknecht from Texas. They continued to lead the classes in the preseminary courses to prepare the Cuban leaders for Seminary level courses which would follow.

The WELS continues to do work in Cuba today. Beginning in 2003 the WELS began the Latin American Traveling Theological Educators. This is a team that would travel to different Latin American Countries, including Cuba, and instruct leaders in preseminary and seminary level courses. These men also continued to help the national church in gathering congregations and in the national organization and structure of the church. The members of the LATTE are: Pastor Lawrence Retberg, Pastor Larry Schlomer, Pastor John Strackbein, Pastor Philip Strackbein, and Pastor Nathan Wagenknecht.

The Lord continues to bless the work that was begun in Cuba ten years ago by John Strackbein and continued to bless through many men. I pray that the Lord would continue to bless his work and his workers as the Gospel is proclaimed to many more lost souls in the harvest fields of Cuba.

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