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THE SONG OF CUBA'S GREAT AWAKENING: MUSIC IN BAPTIST WORSHIP AND WITNESS

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Abstract

From the 1990s to the present, Cuban Baptists have witnessed a time of unparalleled church growth. During that time frame, musicians have participated in ministries aimed at church growth by organizing large-scale public musical events, compiling a Cuban hymnal that included indigenous *cubano* worship songs, developing new programs of leadership training for church musicians, and employing music in missionary projects both at home and abroad. This article explores what can be learned from the Cuban Baptists' experience regarding music as an effective tool in evangelism, the value of musicians reaching musicians as a mission strategy, the importance of ethnodoxology in worship expression, and the interconnection of worship and witness.

INTRODUCTION

The revival movement that some have referred to as “Cuba’s Great Awakening”¹ and the story of church growth among Cuban Baptists is a

1 This is the title of Kurt Urbanek’s book (Church Starting Network, 2012) that describes and

fascinating study. The development of Baptist evangelical work in Cuba can be traced back to its beginning in 1876 through the distribution of Sunday School literature and the establishment of a church in 1883 by Alberto Diaz of the American Bible Society (J. Sharp, 2009, p. 16). The ministry continued through difficulty until the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the American Baptist Home Mission Society met in 1898, dividing the work geographically between the two mission entities. As a result, the SBC focused its efforts on the western half of the island and the American Baptists on the eastern region. Urbanek (2010, p. 69) cites the establishment of both the Western and Eastern Baptist Conventions in 1905, working closely with missionaries from their respective denominations until 1965. With the rise of Fidel Castro in 1959, an exodus of leaders and members from both conventions resulted in weakened churches. According to one who lived through the turmoil, Veguilla (1997) reported that many pastors and seminary students were imprisoned or placed in work camps (as cited in J. Sharp, 2009, p. 28).

According to Esqueda (2007, p. 100), with the loss of so many pastors and missionaries, the evangelical church in Cuba faced many struggles as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Urbanek (2010, pp. 88-89) identifies a major governmental pressure on the churches as the restriction of worship and witness to the church buildings with no evangelistic activity allowed beyond those contexts. Doctrinal conflicts between the conservatives and those influenced by the charismatic movement, especially regarding worship practices, took an additional toll in the 1980s within the Eastern Convention. The growth of the work in the Western Convention was also affected by conflicts and decline through 1990.

But an exciting move of God began to be evidenced from the early 1990s, resulting in a significant number of new churches being started. Urbanek (2010, pp. 112-113) reports that as many new churches began during the first three years of the 1990s as had been accomplished in the prior thirty years. Concurrently, the attitude of the government toward religion was reshaped as the Cuban Constitution was modified in 1992

analyzes the Church Planting Movement (CPM) among the Western and Eastern Conventions of Cuba from 1990 to 2010. The book also briefly examines the growth of the Assembly of God churches during the same time period.

to declare the State as “secular” rather than “atheist.” This important shift opened the door for greater religious expression (J. Sharp, 2009; Urbanek, 2010). In 1998, the Catholic Church in Cuba welcomed a visit from John Paul II, and Baptists hosted the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Havana in 2000.

But that was only the beginning. According to a church growth expert, Cuban Baptists saw explosive growth from 1995 to 2008 with 1,241 new churches and missions being started (Urbanek, 2010, p. 114). Along with this growth, around 4,400 house churches (*casas culto*) were begun. Not surprisingly, with the enormous growth came the lack of ordained pastors and trained leadership for the churches. Just as growth in the early church in Acts was linked to problems in the distribution of food to the widows, growth in the Cuban churches led to the lack of worship leadership for the growing number of congregations and house churches.

The spiritual revival in Cuba has not been limited to the Baptist churches but has been evidenced among both other evangelical and Catholic groups, with Christian denominations growing at a faster rate than at any other time in Cuba’s history (Esqueda, 2006, p. 98). According to Gonzalez Muñoz (2007, pp. 137-138), the rapid church growth of the 1990s was not solely a result of the church’s evangelistic and missionary activities, nor was it a result of changing government policies. Rather, a number of factors coalesced “to create a spiritual revival in Cuba that crossed all denominational lines.” Further, he believed that the revival among Cubans could only be attributed to the work of God. Although Cuba’s church growth was certainly unique, missiologists have described the phenomenon as a Church Planting Movement (Garrison, 2004, pp. 136-137).

Within the overarching story of unprecedented church growth in the Cuban Baptist churches is the story of how music has been used to evangelize and to encourage the churches in their vibrant worship of God. Cubans as a people have a strong affinity for music. A representative of the Cuban Institute of Music in 2010 estimated that 20 percent of the population was involved in music, either as professional musicians in the orchestras and bands; as members of groups playing in clubs, streets, or hotels; as members of professional choirs; or as students in their music

schools (Dirce Cooper, personal communication, February 6, 2020²). The Cuban government accords a high priority to music in general through government funding, as is evidenced by impressive achievements in the areas of music education, radio transmission, publication of scholarly and lay books on music, and the equal access of citizens to performances of all types of music (Manuel, 1990, p. 299). Further, Manuel states that according to some, musical achievement, along with health and education, is one of the primary accomplishments of Fidel Castro's socialism (p. 299).

In light of the fascinating story of explosive church growth within both Eastern and Western Baptist conventions of Cuba, a story that includes many Baptist musicians, the main goal of this article is to explore ways that Cuban church leaders have utilized music as an effective tool in strengthening the church and expanding the church's witness for Christ. As a part of the move of God to expand the reach of the gospel in Cuba, a number of musicians were raised up to contribute to the work using their musical gifts (D. Cooper, personal communication, December 7, 2010). From large-scale public musical events, to street witnessing in public parks with small musical groups, to composing original *cubano* worship songs, Cuban Baptists have leveraged their musical resources to engage in gospel witness, both at home and abroad. This article intends to chronicle and deepen an understanding of some of the ways in which they have done so as they contributed to the task of fulfilling the Great Commission during an era of unparalleled church growth in Cuba.

MUSIC MINISTRY MODELS AND CUBAN BAPTISTS

It is significant that music has often held an important place in Christian revitalization movements. Hatcher (2001, pp.475-476) believes that songs (poetry and music) have functioned within those movements as "an effective means for spreading knowledge of the gospel, stimulating faith, encouraging Christian growth, and expressing the various dimensions of Christian experience." He adds that "poetry and singing are a significant means for forming, expressing, and diffusing an understanding of God, the gospel, and Christian life that speak powerfully to a people's contemporary

2 More generally, this statistic was reported in an article by Baptist Press, Oct 29, 2010 "WEEK OF PRAYER: 'God's Time for Cuba': Churches Multiplying." This percentage estimates that there are approximately 2.2 million musicians in Cuba.

situation.”

The story of Cuba’s Great Awakening is filled with numerous examples of how Cuban Baptists have used music as a powerful vehicle in ways that illustrate the interconnection of worship and witness. Some of their ministry models include public witness through musical events, relationship building and mentoring between Christian and non-Christian professional musicians, leadership development combining music and mission service, and the production of indigenous church music materials for worship. In this article, these music ministry models will be explored.

Public witness through musical events

In 2003, composer and orchestrator, Camp Kirkland, formed the Global Mission Project (GMP), an interdenominational mission organization “committed to leading Christian musicians in sharing Jesus Christ with the world, encouraging believers, and ministering to people through music.”³ Since 2003 the GMP has been working with both Baptist conventions in Cuba and partnering with Christian musical groups from the U.S. to provide Christian witness in Cuba through concert ministry projects. In recent years, a number of ministry concerts have been performed in public venues in Cuba, allowing groups such as The Centurymen, The New Life Foundation Choir and Orchestra, the Mississippi Baptist Singing Churchmen, and the University of Mobile’s Ram Corps, among others, a platform of Christian witness through music. According to Kirkland, “On every project we saw decisions made for Christ. Of course, to see this on every visit is an unbelievable blessing! Our sharing and teaching expanded from year to year as we began to go to the Baptist Seminaries in the East and West. Due to the length of the island, we alternate East and West from year to year” (Kirkland, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

Musicians and relationship-building with other musicians

At the beginning of GMP’s ministry in Cuba, one of their primary goals was to involve Cuban instrumentalists in worship ensembles, teaching them musically and spiritually, plus sharing the gospel in evangelistic concerts (Kirkland, personal communication, February 4, 2020). Musical

³ For mission statement of Global Mission Project, see <http://globalmissionsproject.com>.

activities that brought Christian and non-Christian musicians together was another platform for sharing the gospel in Cuba. In 2004, government permission was given for a joint concert of the National Concert Band, directed by Christian conductor Moises Hernández, with musicians from the U.S. through the ministry of GMP. In other opportunities, many of Cuba's non-Christian professional musicians were attracted to GMP's project "Instrumental Expos," which inspired their fellow musicians who were believers to open cell groups for musicians. As a result, a number of prominent musicians came to know Christ. According to Kirkland (personal communication, February 4, 2020),

One of the incredible things that happened fairly soon after our first visit was professional musicians in Cuba began to hear about our presence each year and the quality of musicians that we were bringing. They wanted to come and be a part and many have over the years. I don't have an exact count but hundreds of professional musicians have come to Christ through our sharing of the gospel message during rehearsals and concerts.

Sharing a natural affinity with other Cuban musicians, Cuban Baptist musicians have found fertile soil in sharing Christ with other musicians as they have participated in musical concerts together.

Development of indigenous church music materials

Himnario cubano. The development of *Himnario Alabanza Cubana* [Cuban Praise Hymnal] was part of the centennial celebrations of both the Western Baptist Convention and the Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba in February of 2005. The collection is a collaboration of 59 Cuban authors and composers from several evangelical groups across the island: Baptists from both Eastern and Western Conventions, Free Will Baptists, Methodists, Assemblies of God, and the Evangelical League. Three Cuban Baptist musicians, Esmirna Jané, Kenia D. Lazo and Sergio P. Lazo, traveled throughout the island collecting songs, most of which had not been transcribed musically.

Although the hymnal is not just an exclusive collection of new and old Cuban songs and hymns, of the 317 hymns included, 117 songs and hymns are compositions by Cuban musicians and pastors, representing 37

percent of the total. According to Steele (2006, pp. 9-19), the indices of this hymnal include a rich resource of aids, including detailed chord charts for use with guitar and musical examples of the *sons* or varied traditional rhythms, such as the *bolero*, *danzón*, *guaguancó*, *guajira*, and *habanera*. In 2014, another edition of the original was completed in digital format. In *Himnario Alabanza Cubana 2*, an additional 191 Cuban songs were added, for a total of 308 indigenous songs. It is significant that the first major collaboration between the two Baptist conventions was centered around the compilation of worship tools. Through a special gift, 10,000 hymnals were made available to the churches.

The digital format contained audio tracks of 175 of the songs, and all the songs were under public domain or licensed under personally-owned copyright so that they could be easily reproduced without future legal issues. The purpose of the production of the digital format was for use in the house church setting, often where trained musicians were lacking, so they could be easily duplicated and used to learn as well as help lead the songs. Presently the impact of this indigenous collection of worship songs has been felt beyond the Baptist worshiping community of Cuba due to the availability of many of these songs worldwide through Amazon and other online distributors through the project “Alabanza Cubana para las naciones” [Cuban Praise for the Nations].

***Cubanos a las naciones* [Cuba to the Nations]**. Just as God has continued to ignite a spiritual awakening among the Cuban people over the past twenty-five years, he has also fueled a desire for obedience to the Great Commission in the hearts of Cuban Baptists. With changes in Cuba’s governmental policies in 2013 resulting in relaxed international travel restrictions, citizens were able to travel internationally as long as they had valid visas. Taking advantage of this change, in 2015 Cuban Baptists began sending missionaries to other countries as a part of a vision “*Cubanos a las naciones*.” In September of that same year, three Cuban Baptist musicians took a six-week assignment to work among an indigenous people group in Colombia (which will be referred to as CPG1 to safeguard the work), specifically working to set Bible passages in the language of the people to music, utilizing the musical styles, cultural rhythms, and harmonies of this people group (D. Cooper, personal communication, September 20, 2015).

Shortly thereafter, other Cuban Baptist musicians supported the CPG1 efforts by participating in four short-term projects, working with three indigenous groups, in order to observe and study the indigenous music and record as many songs as they could from the host culture. Applying what they learned, the missionaries were able to write new songs in the indigenous musical vernacular but with lyrics from the Scriptures. According to Yusin Pons, one of the missionaries, “The purpose of this is to leave them [the people group] musical materials the believers can use to worship God, and, at the same time, to teach God’s Word to the tribe by means of songs” (personal communication, February 8, 2016). Since oral communication is fundamental for teaching this ethnic group, the musicians recorded the songs in order to teach them to the people. Evangelistic fruit from this work is beginning to blossom as D. Cooper relayed the following from one of the field reports: “This past week they celebrated the baptism of some of the tribe’s new Christians. While baptizing, they sang one of the songs Cuban musicians wrote while with them – in their language and their musical style” (personal communication, June 21, 2016). But to be truly indigenous, the missionaries have encouraged those who have come to Christ from that culture to write their own songs. In a report from the field, one of the missionaries (D. Cooper, personal communication, May 25, 2016) shared the story of José, a young musician from the tribe who had been assisting with translations and recordings. José eventually declared his faith in Christ, even though it meant persecution from his family. Soon after, he composed a testimony song that says (translated here in English):

I want to be free from the power of the demon,
I want to follow Jesus forever.
Why do I want to follow Jesus?
Because my soul will be happy with him.
Why do you need to follow Jesus?
Because your soul will be happy with him.

Mentoring musicians and servant leaders.

One of the plans the Baptist conventions have used for training music

leaders during the last two decades is the formation of music schools.⁴ The purpose of these schools hosted by local churches is to “train servants who are suitable to use their musical gifts in the edification of the church in various ministries.”⁵ An organized curriculum was adopted for the schools with specific outcomes that focused on leadership training in the areas of music, worship and worship planning, biblical and theological studies, and spiritual growth.⁶

In 2001 there were a total of seven music schools hosted by local churches. Eventually the number grew to 53 schools, training a total of 1,097 students representing 207 churches and 149 house churches, excluding the number of house churches represented in the Eastern Baptist Convention that were not reported (D. Cooper, personal communication, January 14, 2010). The schools are hosted in very diverse contexts, from isolated rural areas to large churches in the capital. In keeping with the DNA of the schools’ mission, students from the schools were encouraged to be involved in mission projects and join church planting teams. The schools go on mission trips to places in Cuba where there is little to no evangelical presence to help start churches. One of the most successful efforts was done in the community of Vueltas, in one of Cuba’s northern central provinces. The music schools from the West sent four teams to join the Vueltas missionaries with the purpose of starting Bible studies that would result in a church start. As a result, four churches were organized in that area (D. Cooper, personal communication, February 26, 2020⁷). Each year the teachers of the schools participated in Annual Intensive

4 This information was provided by Dirce Cooper, IMB itinerant missionary working in close association with convention leaders, in an email to the authors dated January 14, 2010.

5 Translated from the curriculum document, revised 2005, “Convención Bautista de Cuba Oriental, Escuelas de Música para líderes de adoración currículo” [Eastern Cuba Baptist Convention, Music Schools for Curriculum Worship Leaders].

6 Specific goals for training students stated in the curriculum addressed the following areas: being a disciple who is growing in his or her personal relationship with Christ; being a mentor who can teach others what he or she is learning; worship service planning that helps the congregation experience the presence of God; planning and coordinating the ministry of music and other arts for the church; directing congregational singing; accompanying congregational singing with an instrument; directing choirs and praise teams; leading discipleship groups, pastoring the musicians involved in the ministry of the church.

7 Excerpted from a field report to the IMB (no date).

Training for Teachers. On two occasions, teachers from both conventions met together for this training.

Beginning in 2017 the Eastern Baptist Convention's Commission of Music and Worship undertook the development of plans to make the music school training accessible in remote areas of Eastern Cuba where there was no possibility of opening schools. The plans included volunteer musicians traveling weekly to the rural zones to teach in the areas of spiritual foundations, prayer, the use of music in church planting, and musical skill development. Soon thereafter, the ministry of *Manos, Arpa, y Voz* [Hands, Harp, and Voice] was birthed to support the growing work of the ministry of Worship and Music in the convention, including the music schools. The ministry of *Manos, Arpa, y Voz*, under the supervision of the convention, expanded to include the central goals of service, music teaching, and evangelism: (1) *Manos* [Hands]: serving and helping those most in need through providing food, medicine, and spiritual help; (2) *Arpa* [Harp]: providing training to prepare musicians and worship leaders in the more than 200 churches that did not have access to music schools; and (3) *Voz* [Voice]: evangelizing through the proclamation of the greatness of God and the hope of salvation found in Christ (Elio Mora, personal communication and report, December 1, 2017).

From the beginning of the music schools, students were often invited by convention leaders to use their musical gifts in mission service projects to needy communities. According to Elio Mora, many students participated in these activities, which often included sharing food and medical supplies, in addition to musical witness, as a platform for sharing the gospel.⁸ This ministry became more structured through the development of *Manos, Arpa, y Voz*. It is worth noting that the music schools have continually demonstrated a desire to equip their students as musicians and as missionaries through their emphasis on church planting, service to needy communities, and disaster relief in the aftermath of hurricanes.

In addition to the development of music schools designed to train and encourage musicians in the churches, the seminary in Havana began to provide more formal training for those called to worship ministry. At the

⁸ Personal phone interview with Elio Mora, February 24, 2020.

Havana seminary's request in 2004, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) and the Division of Church Music Ministries⁹ entered into a partnership over a four-year period to provide NOBTS teachers to the Cuba seminary for a thirty-hour program of study (concentration) in worship leadership¹⁰ in the seminary degree. This program of studies was historic for several reasons: it was a cohort model that included twenty selected students (key music leaders from both Eastern and Western Baptist conventions) and was the first specialized "concentration" area to be offered in the seminary. It was anticipated that graduates of this program would serve future seminary students as teachers in both the Eastern and Western Baptist seminaries' worship ministry curriculum. The first class of twenty students (13 from the West and 7 from the East) with the new concentration graduated in Havana in June 2008. Since that time, these graduates have provided leadership for subsequent classes in the seminaries. Additionally, they have continued to provide key leadership to both conventions in the area of worship ministry. Six leaders were appointed as short-term missionaries and three as long-term missionaries who are still on the field.

OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTION

What can Cuban Baptists in general, and Cuban Baptist missionary musicians in particular, who have witnessed an enormous move of God in their context, teach us about the connection between worship and witness? Our analysis will focus on these main ideas: music as an effective tool in evangelism, musicians as a viable group in missionary strategy (musicians reaching musicians), the importance of ethnodoxology in worship expression, and the inevitable connection between worship and witness.

Music in evangelism. From the very birth of the early church in Acts, music has played an important part in evangelism. Paul and Silas's

9 Two of the church music division faculty had served as IMB missionaries in Spanish-speaking contexts and were fluent in Spanish. The other faculty who participated did so through translation.

10 The thirty hours of specific music and worship courses, adapted from the Master of Arts in Worship Ministries curriculum at NOBTS, included worship leadership, theology of worship, sacred song (hymnology), philosophy of music/worship, conducting techniques, music theory, history of worship, worship planning, leadership lab, and music/worship in the 21st century.

experience in Acts 16:25-34 is one of the most illustrative examples:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose. When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household. (Christian Standard Bible)

Beaten and imprisoned, the pair of evangelists responded to their circumstances with thanksgiving and praise; there is no mention of any sermon or other vocal witness, yet the power of their praise not only ministered to the others being held in the cells but was instrumental in moving the jailer to initiate a gospel conversation.

Hustad (1993) describes how music also played an important role in the revival movements of the 1700s through the 1800s. A number of collections of shaped-note songs were compiled in the *Kentucky Harmony*, *Southern Harmony*, and *The Sacred Harp*, to name a few. The nineteenth century gave rise to the gospel song, often accompanying the revivals led by Moody and Sankey in the United States. Hunt (1987) documents the strong connection between the use of music and missionary activity, noting that music has long been an effective tool for sharing the gospel.

As noted earlier, musical events by Christian musicians have contributed to the effort to reach Cuba for Christ. Concerts in major venues in cities from Havana to Santiago have provided opportunities to proclaim the

Good News through a musical platform. One of these concerts, sponsored by the Western Baptist Convention, was held in the Teatro Martí in Havana in August 2017 and included a performance of “Creo en Dios” [I Believe in God], a Christian song of testimony by Yusin Pons, well-known by many of the Baptist churches in Cuba. According to Pons (personal communication, August 18, 2017), this concert was favorably reported in Cuba’s primary news outlet.

As Cuban Baptists began to expand their mission efforts beyond their borders, the first group of three musicians traveled to Colombia in 2015, spending six weeks composing songs sharing the gospel of Christ in the musical style and language of one of the indigenous groups. A report from the field carefully describes how God used music as a tool for witness.¹¹ According to the report, the Indian chief liked the songs and asked the schools to include them in their teaching. Curious about Cuban songs, the Indian people invited the Cuban missionaries to sing their songs in one of their celebrations: the worship of the moon. According to the report, “The missionaries struggled with that invitation since they could not imagine participating in the worship of the moon and tribe’s false gods. But, they agreed to go. And the following is what happened in their own words:

The indigenous community of [name omitted] celebrates the “night of the moon” every month. On this night the community gathers to worship the moon and perform rituals to their gods. For the celebration of October, they invited the Cuban missionaries to sing Cuban songs. The community was waiting for this event; it was announced on the radio station, the school, and in the houses of the community. Everything was ready for this great celebration.

The Indians had the following agenda: Presentation of the guests, Cuban songs, presentation of a poem by an indigenous from the community, and rituals to worship the moon and their gods by the *jaibana* (witch doctor).

Everything started as planned, and after presenting the guests, the Cuban missionaries began the long-awaited presentation of

11 This field report was included as part of a presentation made to the trustees of the International Mission Board, May 21–23, 2019, by missionary Dirce Cooper, recounting the ways God has been at work using Cuban Baptists in witness to the nations.

Cuban music. The music started, and what the Indians did not expect was that the Cuban music was praises to worship Jesus. After singing six songs of praise to Jesus, the natives applauded and thanked the Cubans for the beautiful presentation they had made.

The agenda continued and at the moment in which the *jaibanas* (the witch doctors) were preparing to do their rituals, a very heavy rain began and dispersed the whole community, and the moon and the gods of the natives could not be praised. The only [One] exalted and adored that night was Jesus. The following day the community recognized through the radio station that the Cuban musicians are Christians, and that this celebration of the moon was made for Jesus.

The report also added that “among the first ones [of the community] who accepted Christ as their God were the son of the witch doctor and his friend. The Cuban musicians began asking themselves who would help these new Christians to grow in their faith and continue to take the gospel to their communities. Through this, they sensed God calling them to return and continue the work God had begun.”

Musicians reaching musicians. One of the major areas of mission strategy today is a focus on unreached people groups. Generally, these people groups are related by ethnic identity, with a common language, religion, and history.¹² The strategy behind targeting them seeks to provide these groups with access to the gospel in the face of language and cultural barriers. But Pearsaul (1998, p. 86) reports on a non-traditional application of this strategy: “When one thinks of unreached people groups, classical musicians aren’t likely to spring to mind. But hundreds of musicians are aiming to reach the world of classical music with a Christian witness.” In an article in *Christianity Today*, she referred to the founding of the Christian Performing Arts Fellowship (CPAF) in Washington, D.C., in 1984 whose goal was to communicate God’s glory through beautiful

12 According to the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in an internet article entitled “Here’s What We Mean by Unreached Peoples and Places,” <https://www.imb.org/2016/11/22/what-do-we-mean-by-unreached-peoples-and-places/>.

music. Their membership, made up mostly of professional musicians in the performing arts (music, dance, and theater), strives to excel in the language of their “people group” as a means of gaining a hearing for the gospel with their colleagues (Pearsaul, p. 86).

In Cuba, the Christian musicians, in partnership with musicians from the U.S., have seen God at work as they have utilized the same approach. As they have been fervent in prayer for other musicians, God has answered. The “language,” or common identity as music professionals among both believing and non-believing Cuban musicians has provided an open door to sharing the gospel. GMP founder Camp Kirkland related that “many of the professionals [musicians] who have come to Christ are now sharing with their peers in Cuba to illuminate them to the profound love of God” (Kirkland, personal communication, February 4, 2020). A field report from Cuba itinerant missionaries, Roy and Dirce Cooper, dated March-April 2011, communicated the following highlights of Christian musicians reaching their peers for Christ:

For at least 6 years, we have been praying that God would give us His plan to reach the 2.2 million people who are involved in music. In Bayamo and Las Tunas, cell groups for musicians were created that have resulted in many decisions for Christ. In other cities like Holguin, musicians have been sharing with their colleagues. On March 31, a group of twenty-four musicians arrived in Holguin from the U.S. (Camp Kirkland and GMP ministry). Our main purpose was to join nationals in harvesting the fruit of seeds they have been faithfully planting through cell groups, relationships and their jobs; in planting new seeds; in sharing the urgency of reaching every musician for Christ. And God answered . . . ninety-eight national musicians joined us. In the group were several musicians who had made their decisions [for Christ] in cell groups but most of them were non-Christians. Among these were conductors, a concert master, members of symphonies and bands, singers, teachers, music students and an entire band who travelled in a truck from a city approximately one and a half hours away. During the rehearsals, personal testimonies and the gospel were shared. When the invitation was given, at least twenty-six made

their decision public. . . . But it was in Baracoa that I heard the amazing testimony of a musician called Juan [not his real name]. His story reminded me that prayer is the most important resource I have to offer anyone. His testimony is a powerful display of God's transforming love. When he was seven years old, his mother set herself on fire while he watched in horror. He was then taken to live with relatives who sold him to prostitution. Ten years ago a loving pastor and his wife started caring for him, teaching him about God's love. Now, at age 24, he is a missionary, a leader of the fastest growing house group that the church has. He sang one of his compositions and the first stanza says: "To Jesus, Lord and God, I give my heart. He is the one who can change my life for a better one. Today I want to worship Him surrendering my will. And may all see in me His eternal power." He was asked "How do you lead your people?" His answer was: "I know where I came from, so I have no option but to lead on my knees."

Ethnodoxology. According to R. R. King (2004, pp. 296-297), while music as a phenomenon is universal, its meaning is not. Harris (2013, p. 83) believes that musical vernacular has attached meanings that are understood within a given culture, and that "our ability to decode the sounds we hear is culturally conditioned." The discipline of ethnomusicology addresses such questions as to how music communicates in different cultures as well as how the church sings its own faith in a given culture (King, 2013, p. 113). As a related discipline, *ethnodoxology* is the study of the ways people worship God in cultures around the world (Harris, 2013, p. 86).

The compilation of the hymnal *Alabanza Cubana* [Cuban Praise] is an example of how Cuban Baptists were sensitive to the need for musical worship materials in their own vernacular. As mentioned earlier, more than a third of the songs and hymns included were written by Cuban pastors and musicians. The second edition added an additional 191 indigenous songs, representing a number of indigenous Cuban rhythms and styles. A prayer offered during a service of dedication of the new hymnal included the following, a commentary on the value of offering stylistically contextualized praise in the heart music of the people: "We dedicate the

rhythms, genres and styles that we have included in this collection in order to worship You in multiple ways, just as You have created a whole diversity of marvelous things for us. We intend to fill our praise with color in the effort to compensate for all the perfection and detail with which You have continually surrounded us.”¹³

According to King (2013, p. 115), the need to exegete the context musically is a critical principle of ethnomusicology. The hymnal committee spent considerable time determining what styles could and could not be included. Certain rhythmic style patterns were not included due to their perceived non-musical associations that potentially carried a moral or ethical association not conducive to the purposes of worship. M. Sharp (2009, p. 136) relates that one of the hymnal committee members objected to one of the Cuban *ritmos* [rhythmic styles] because it immediately caused him to think of his life before knowing Christ and the pagan lifestyle associated with the musical idiom. As he stated, this music was not edifying to him because of its prior association in his life. As a result, that particular *ritmo* was not included in the hymnal.

Just as Cuban musicians understood the need to provide worship music in the Cuban people’s heart language through their work on the hymnals, they undertook their missionary work with that same vision. In order to develop the production and recording of worship songs in the musical vernacular of the CPG1 tribe, the first task of the Cuban music missionaries was to observe and understand the structural and stylistic elements of the host culture’s music. Working in concert with linguists and musicians of the tribe, they were able to engage in an indigenous process to promote the creation of musically-meaningful Christian worship materials.

Sergio Lazo and Kenia Lazo were two members of the Cuban hymnal project who were heavily involved in the production of *Alabanza Cubana*. Having a personal understanding of the great value of worship music in one’s musical “heart language,” these were two Cuban Baptists who expressed a call to missionary service to Colombia. Their experience with the hymnal undoubtedly helped

13 Prayer for the Dedication of *Alabanza Cubana 2* by Yusin Pons, El Calvario Church, Havana, Cuba, March 14, 2014, and First Baptist Church in Santiago, Cuba, July 4, 2014.

them see how indigenous music could be effective in meaningfully transmitting the gospel to unreached people groups. In one of their reports, a young missionary, Gloria, shares some of the processes and challenges involved in “exegeting the culture musically”:

We continue working on the arrangements for already-existing songs. This implies doing the instrumentation, then recording a demo of the song with Gloria’s voice so that the CPG1 can learn it. Because they do not read music, we have to teach it to them orally. We already have six demos ready for the CPG1 group where we are and three demos for the CPG1 group from another village. We have four other songs ready to record the demos tonight (we always have to wait until very early morning to record because we do not have a sound-proof studio; it is better to make the recordings when there is no noise in the street). . . . Also, this weekend we will continue preparing arrangements in order to have other songs ready by the beginning of next week. As far as it is possible to do so, we are trying to adjust the melodies for the 2 languages in order to leave some songs for the two CPG1 groups. This week we have had great joy. Carlos, one of the CPG1 young people who has been in the Sunday worship services here with us, made the decision to be baptized, because he understands that he wants to forever be a follower of Jesus. (Email from Gloria as cited in D. Cooper, personal communication, May 25, 2016).

Yusin Pons, another Cuban musician who worked on the *Alabanza Cubana* hymnal, relates his aspiration for witnessing to unreached peoples in Colombia through music: “The musician missionary Ernesto Rodriguez and I will be working among the tribes [CPG1] . . . helping in songwriting and translation of Christian songs in their dialects. Besides that, we will work in mobilization of the local church and, through music teaching and concerts, open opportunities to the gospel among the communities of natives” (Personal communication, January 7, 2016).

For these missionaries, the connection between worship music and missionary activity is strong. Their experience, in their homeland as well as

in Colombia, gives credence to the idea that the use of indigenous worship music can be an effective means of communicating God's love with others.

The connection between worship and witness. Piper (2013, p. 97) explains how passion for God correlates to a powerful witness to unbelievers. He states: "Churches that are not centered on the exaltation of the majesty and beauty of God will scarcely kindle a fervent desire to 'declare his glory among the nations' (Psalm 96:3). But when the flame of worship burns with the heat of God's true worth, then the light of missions will shine to the most remote peoples on earth." Wheeler and Whaley (2011, p. 195) describe what Christians look like when their lives express a healthy relationship between worship and witness: "What the church needs is men and women who live and breathe Great Commission worship. . . . They see the Great Commission through hearts of worship. They live worship for the glory of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." This is what one notices in observing Baptist life in the era of Cuba's Great Awakening. Alongside the unparalleled church growth experienced in Baptist churches during the past thirty years, we have also seen a worship renewal among the congregations. As Cuban Baptists have been stirred to look upward and give glory to God, they have also been stirred to look outward and find ways to share the gospel within their nation and beyond. Baptist musicians, in particular, have found ways to offer their musical giftedness in service to the Great Commission as God has provided opportunities for large-scale witness through music in a society with a long history of suppression. As their churches have multiplied, they have found ways to provide training opportunities for more leaders, despite a lack of financial resources. It seems evident that as these leaders have been discipled, they have had a greater desire to be on mission for Christ through serving others. Their passion for Christ as worshipers has fueled their desire for deeper commitment as ambassadors for Christ.

The story of church growth and the interplay of music with how God has been at work in Cuba in the recent past illustrates the powerful interrelationship between worship, discipleship, and missions. Mark Powers (2013, p. 55) puts it this way: "When we grasp what true worship is, it will deepen our discipleship. When we grow deeper in discipleship, we will worship more authentically. True worship and discipleship compel us

to join God on mission. When we join God every day and every moment on mission, the results flow back into worship and discipleship.” This is the song of Cuba’s Great Awakening among the Baptists, a song of heartfelt praise to God with three interwoven themes: the joyful worship of God who is supremely worthy of worship, a deeper commitment to Christ through obedience to His Word, and overflowing compassionate witness for Christ, both at home and to the nations. To God be the glory, great things He has done!

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