

# A sermon 20 years ago paved way for ministry in Cuba

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CENTER—God paved the way for [First Baptist Church in Center](#) to minister in Cuba 20 years ago by softening a single heart.

Education Minister John Bender and Mike Brister, former youth minister at the church and now leader of [Stepstones Ministry International](#), travelled to Cuba after a trip Bender made to Cuba two decades ago continued to produce spiritual fruit.



John Bender, minister of education at First Baptist Church in Center, returned to Cuba after first preaching there 20 years ago. His church plans to help First Baptist Church in Baire, Cuba, in its program of training Christian leaders. Bender's initial invitation to Cuba developed from his relationship with a church in Guadalajara, Mexico, even though he was new to ministry.

"I think I probably only had about four sermons," he recalled.

While the other Americans on the team worked primarily in the city and stayed in a motel there, Bender and a Mexican pastor journeyed to a rural village. Rather than commute back and forth each day, Bender decided to stay in the village.

“I didn’t know how big a deal that was—that the American was ‘going to stay in my house.’ To me, it wasn’t anything—I was saving gas money. But to them it was huge,” he said.

### **‘If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?’**

He preached about 35 times that week in various house churches and Bible schools. One man attended one of those services at the persistent urging of his mother. After the service, he returned to his job as a bartender, but a short time later, he witnessed a terrible car wreck outside the entrance to the bar. When he saw the cars and the people involved, he recalled Bender asking, “If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?”

He rushed back to his mother’s village, spoke with the pastor there and made a profession of faith in Christ.

That man, Victor Manuel, now a pastor and a national Baptist leader in Cuba, contacted Bender about 18 months ago through a pastor in Miami.

Bender invited Brister to that meeting, as well. Brister’s ministry provides training and logistical assistance to prepare churches for hands-on missions involvement.

“We work with churches to help them move either across the street or to the international setting in missions. We’re just trying to mobilize the local church for a global impact,” he explained.

### **A call to ministry**

God began calling him to the ministry while he still was youth minister at

First Baptist Church in Center, Brister said. He asked how youth could hear a call to missions service without any exposure to it. His ministry now exposes both youth and adults to missions in Tennessee, Guatemala and Haiti. Soon, Cuba apparently will be added to the list.



Cuban children participate in a “happy hour”—a children’s ministry First Baptist Church in Baire, Cuba, offers at several locations in its community. Stepstones not only educates churches about the biblical mandate for missions, but also trains them in cultural differences about the places they will minister, including some language training.

“The ultimate goal is to link them with a missionary they can work with, support and encourage,” Brister said.

Bender and Brister found a vibrant ministry at First Baptist Church in Baire, Cuba, where Manuel is pastor. They took part in four services with 400 to 500 people attending each, from a community of about 6,000.

The church also is engaged in children’s ministry at several locations scattered about the community each week. “He calls them ‘happy hours’—that name probably wouldn’t work here,” Bender quipped.

The church owns a camp where it conducts a retreat ministry. Bender hopes to use the camp for a leadership retreat in September, and Brister hopes to take a team of adults next February to lead a children's camp.

Cuba restricted religious practice after the communist revolution of 1959, but Baptists maintained a presence in the country.

"The Baptist church has already been established, and they already have communication with the government. It's a good relationship and they are growing churches," Bender said.

### **A need for more training**

While the government has loosened its restrictions on religion since 1992, Baptist pastors recognize the newfound freedom led to an increase in false teaching.

Consequently, they consider it imperative to provide greater training for their leaders so they can make stronger Christian disciples.

Both Bender and Brister noted surprises in their experience with churches in Cuba.

"The Cubans were more Americanized than we anticipated. Some of the songs we sang on Sunday mornings there, we haven't even sung on Sunday morning here—Chris Tomlin and Vineyard music," Bender said.

Cuba also is more developed than rural areas of Guatemala and Haiti, Brister added.

They were impressed by Manuel's congregation's ministry, as well.

"The church is doing things right. They are training leaders and putting them in position. They just need some extra encouragement," Brister said.

## **Solving the problem of getting to Cuba**

The greatest difficulty is travel to Cuba, the men acknowledged. Cuban documentation was easy, they said, but the U.S. paperwork is more complicated. Because of that, some choose to fly from the United States to Canada or other neighboring countries to enter Cuba, but both men said they were uncomfortable with the ethics of that workaround.

They eventually travelled to Cuba under the auspices of a U.S. ministry licensed by the American government to take volunteers there. Stepstones is in the process of securing its own license.

Cuba will be a good place for the congregation to experience international missions at a more reasonable cost than many overseas trips—about \$2,000, Bender said.

“We have a Spanish mission that meets here; we have an African mission that meets here; and we have our Burmese mission, but we’re not really active with them,” he said.

“This would be one place where I think the body could go. It’s really safe. This would be a place where our congregation can know, ‘I can go across the street, but I also have a place I can go fairly cheaply, where I don’t have to be a theological student, but I can bring encouragement.’”

## **A year of prayer**

On their trip to Cuba, Brister learned the Baire congregation had just completed a year of praying for people they knew who had not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

“We had numerous people come to us after services or during the day and say: ‘I’ve been praying and I’ve been sharing Christ with some friends and family, and they’ve not yet become believers. Would you come and share

with them one more time?’ That was highly encouraging to me—to see people so passionate to see their friends and family come to Christ,” Brister said.