

**1998 E.H. JOHNSON AWARDEE
REV. HECTOR MENDEZ
PRESBYTERIAN-REFORMED CHURCH IN CUBA
JUNE 9, 1998**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

First of all I would like to thank God for the opportunity he gives me to be here with you. I want also to show my gratitude to the Committee for the E.H. Johnson Trust Fund which has honoured me with this award, and to our dear Presbyterian Church in Canada which we love very much.

Canada is one of the countries we appreciate very much as a Church. We are joined with bonds which have been strengthened constantly. We frequently welcome visitors from different Canadian denominations in our Church. Sometimes we also welcome high officers of the Canadian government who are kindly interested in learning how Cuban Presbyterians think. We welcome many representatives of Canadian NGOs; we welcome representatives of the YMCA-Canada which supports our work in Cuba very much. We tell you that we have strong bonds with Canada. At a luncheon we had last year it was a surprise for us that the Canadian Ambassador in Cuba was very well familiar with the work we were doing, especially our help to the poorest in Cuba. Canadian journals such as the "Maclean's" magazine have included part of our opinions about the Cuban situation and our work. Canada is for us a country of the North, rich and powerful, but it has a great sensibility and interest for helping to develop countries in the South, without any kind of imposition or prepotency. That is what we admire from this big country and we respectfully express it in this occasion.

I would like to add that to receive this award is not only a great honour but also a way to renew my commitment to my people and to the Church of Jesus Christ. This award, named in memory of one of your great mission leaders, has to serve also to honour the Christians in Cuba who have given witness of their faith at very difficult times. To them, humble men and women, but who have a strong faith, I dedicate this award.

1. Mission and Society

Nowadays and especially on this occasion, it is necessary to think about what our Mission in Society is. Maybe, I have to begin explaining how much times have changed and that until the middle of this century in many churches no one talked about the Church Mision in the Society, but the opposite. The aim was to isolate the Church from the Society more and more. To take the human being from a society where sin was common to a better place: the church where he or she could be protected against sin.

At the same time mission became a term always related to mission efforts which had not so good results in Latin America where many missionaries, especially from the United States, were received and who misunderstood the preaching of Gospel. They, directly or indirectly imposed a political, cultural, social and economic model. So a cultural transplant took place many times and it hindered our churches to have an active participation with the people. Sometimes the difference between the "missionary" and the native was so big. In other times the "mission paternalism" damaged and hindered the training of religious leaders in the countries where they worked.

To be fair, we have to say that the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba is a church which has very nice memories of its missionaries, because they were really self-sacrificed men and women who were with us at difficult times. Honestly, we are seen as an exceptional case, because our relations with our missionaries were very good and they did not hinder the academic preparation and training of Cuban church leaders to take care of our churches and our educational activity.

What is for us Cubans, to talk about the Church Mission in the Society?

We have to remember that we live in a country with special characteristics here in the Americas. We live in a communist country and we have been part of a revolution which has changed all our society structures. For many years our mission has been different. We can not do our mission in the same way. Therefore, we cannot copy from others directly. We can learn from each other, but every country and every situation has its own characteristics.

II. The Church Mission in a Socialist Society

Cuba declared itself as a socialist country in 1961. For our Church and for all Cuban churches it was something unexpected. We were not ready for such a fast change. For years, since our independence from Spain in 1902, Cuba had been closely linked to the American policy. In those days it was said that a Cuban president could have all the world against him except the United States. This was the way of thinking. This was the expression of the real power of the American economy in the Cuban society. Therefore, when Cuba declared itself as a socialist country, the Cuban Church fell into a crisis. Personally, I think that the first type of crisis of the Cuban churches had at that time was a crisis of identity. How far did the churches represent the ideal of the American political and social system? Since that time and especially when the churches lost all their schools because they were nationalized by the revolutionary government, a lot of Cuban pastors and lay leaders left the country to the United States. For example, in 1960, the Presbyterian Church in Cuba had 53 pastors; after those years some young pastors were ordained and in 1967 there were only 15 Presbyterian pastors in Cuba. Most of our pastors had left the country and had gone to the United States.

It was in the middle of this crisis when I asked God: “Lord, what is the mission you have for me in this place?” I remember that they were hard times. We had no kind of resources in our churches; all pastors decided by themselves to reduce their salaries; there were no Bibles to give; there were no pieces of equipment; there were no transports; there was no literature, no money, and our churches began to be practically empty. Sadly, we had no people in the churches.

I repeat that they were very hard times and we cried many times. We were in the middle. For the government we represented a reactionary sector of the society. For many members of the Church who had no real idea of our role, we represented peoples who were used by communism. At that time our prayers were: “Lord, show us you will so that we can realize what is our mission in Cuban society.”

Let me give you an example. We had a few youth in our Church and one way we used to attract them was our Summer Camps. I have to say that we had our Summer Camps by faith. Generally, we did not know what kind of food we would have the next day. However, God always gave us something and the youth were satisfied. I can also tell you that at that time we had not a single piece of paper to print our lessons for our Sunday Schools on our very old fashioned printing equipment. Usually some people from the Church who worked in governmental offices took some sheets of paper from those places and, in this way, we could print our Bible materials. As you can see ethics was also changed in our society to carry out our mission.

I remember a very interesting anecdote in my life. As a Pastor, I took care of one of the biggest churches in the central part of the country. Besides, I had to go once a week to a village where we had a small church with about 20 people, almost all women. That week, it was very difficult to arrive at that place. The distance from the city where I lived to the village was only 25 km. but there was practically no transport and I spent all day to arrive at that small town. That night I opened the sanctuary and waited. Sadly only one woman attended the church. She knew I had had difficulties travelling and she said to me:

“Pastor, if you wish, let us pray you can come back home tonight.” Then I answered her: “Sister, you came to attend a service and we will worship God.” I put on my robe and we had a complete service. That night I preached about hope. Can you imagine a pastor preaching to only one woman, and he was preaching about our hope in Christ and he said that one day that sanctuary would be full of people worshipping God! It was in 1980. Undoubtedly it was madness. Nevertheless, in 1990 there was an opening to the Christian faith in our country and I had the privilege to preach in that sanctuary completely full of people. A month ago I went again, invited to that church, and the sanctuary was full and many children were there to be baptized.

Moreover, after almost 35 years without being involved in any social work, because the state had assumed that task, the Church has begun again to serve the community. Little by little we have taken a space again. In our Presbyterian Church of Havana, we had an attendance of 70 people weekly. Now, over 300 people attend our worship services, and our different projects cover an average of almost one thousand people weekly. Three years ago we opened a library with Christian literature, and this is the only Protestant library in the city of Havana. We have lent books to children and youth and we have not lost one. We decided to open a Center for Family Orientation and it has had a great success. In collaboration with YMCA, we also began our service “Your Friendly Phone” (a Hot Line) to help people in crisis and it is very well known and gives a great service to the community. Our Church has a model project for taking care of elderly people in our district. Concerning evangelism, we have opened two new missions in different places in Havana.

Something which has had a great success was our “Bible Studies in Homes”. This is the way to be directly with God’s Word. In the week we have Bible Studies, about 300 people study the Bible that night. I have to tell you that our sanctuary is the only Protestant church in Cuba which opens its doors daily. We have a team of 28 lay people who take care of the sanctuary, inform the people who are coming, pray with them and give them religious literature. Much still remains to be done and we have to continue finding out what we can do in our country to serve God in the midst of our society.

This is the key to the Church’s Mission: to discover God in the midst of the signs of the times, to find new opportunities in the midst of dilemmas.

III. Our Vision of the Church Mission in a Globalized World

When we analyze the Church’s Mission, we have to mention the world situation. Nowadays, we live in the middle of the so-called “globalization”. A world which increasingly depends on great transnationals which impose their economic patterns. No more governments but the so-called “market economy” imposes patterns to follow. We live in a world where many political utopias have been eliminated, mainly for the Third World. We live in a world where communications bring closer power structures and where children from the North learn how to use the Internet from a very young age. However, in the same world, countries from the South have no phones. How sad I was when I visited refugee camps in Angola or in Mozambique and I found so much malnutrition and poverty! How sad I was when I saw the lack of doctors in many countries in Latin America or in Africa! How sad it is when many rich countries impose conditions on these poor countries.

As Christians we have to continue preaching hope. In this common task we are all together. American journalists in the United States almost always ask me the same question: “Is it too difficult to be a Christian in a socialist country?” I always answer the same thing: “It is as difficult to be a Christian in a socialist country as in a capitalist country where there is a lot of richness and temptations.”

Our concept of Church Missions in Society has to be linked to the concept of justice. In this world where industry is globalized, where market is globalized, where communications are globalized, we, Christians, have to learn to globalize justice, solidarity and fraternity.

We have to live the Church Mission with suffering and, at the same time, with a great vocation for service. Nowadays the people acknowledge those who serve them and those who help them, not those who are powerful. I remember when I celebrated 30 years of being ordained as a Pastor in 1995. My Church of Havana organized a great celebration. We received a lot of messages congratulating me from different parts of the world. The Church tried to organize many activities to give me a surprise. The night before the celebration I saw an exhibition of photos. Of course, they found photos where I was with presidents, political leaders, religious leaders, Nobel prize-winners, etc. When I saw the photo exhibition, I searched for a photograph and I put it in the middle of the board. It was a photo where I was with poor children in a small church and then I took the opportunity to give a lesson about the Church's Mission. I said to them: "Everything is important. In the present world, it is important to reach presidents, personalities, but we have to keep in mind that we do this in terms of those whom the Lord Jesus Christ named our little brothers."

Today in Cuba, churches are full. The people are looking for a spiritual strength. The people are looking for hope. The youth is looking for more community and fraternity feelings. Parents want their children to be educated in a faith. This was not possible to imagine 8 years ago, when the social prejudice against believers caused the churches to be empty.

However, in the middle of this situation there were men, women, young people and children who were faithful during difficult times. The Church's Mission passed through personal witnesses. Our actions said what we were not able to express with words. Our Church has to be a prophetic church at any time, especially with our own witnesses.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to finish explaining to you about the practical experience of work with the people. My personal statement about the "Mission of the Church Today" can be summarized as follows:

FIRSTLY: No political, social or economic systems can destroy the Church of Jesus Christ;

SECONDLY: Our mission has to be expressed firstly by our own witness;

THIRDLY: In the present world of globalization, Christians and the Church have to emphasize the need of "globalizing" justice and solidarity.

FOURTHLY: In carrying out our mission it is essential not to lose hope. Hope must remain forever.

May God be with us in our Mission!

Thank you.