



6.28.2011

CUBA Baptist pastor prevented from attending church service as pressure on all denominations intensifies

Baptist Pastor Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso and his wife, Yoaxis, were part of a group of 23 who were detained by Cuban police on Sunday, June 26 and prevented from attending a church service in Santa Clara, in support of a pastor who was controversially removed from his post. They were picked up by police at around 10 am on Sunday morning and released five hours later, after the service had ended.

The Sunday morning service at the Santa Clara Methodist Church was held in support of Pastor Yordi Toranzo, who was removed from his position as pastor by the Methodist Bishop Ricardo Pereira Dias, because of his refusal to deny pastoral support to human rights activists and members of the political opposition.

Pastor Yordi Toranzo is the second high-profile pastor in Santa Clara to step down or be removed this year because of government pressure. Baptist Pastor Homero Carbonell issued a public statement at the beginning of 2011 explaining that he and his church had come under severe government pressure because of his refusal to expel families of political prisoners from the church. Pastors Carbonell and Toranzo were also involved in a cross-denominational citywide march on Easter Sunday in 2010 which drew thousands and angered the authorities.

The Santa Clara Methodist Church has issued a public statement calling on the Bishop to reverse his decision and church leaders of all denominations in Santa Clara have made statements to the Methodist hierarchy in support of Pastor Toranzo.

There is general agreement among church leaders in Santa Clara that the Bishop's decision was made because of intense government pressure. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received reports from sources in Cuba confirming similar pressure on leaders in other denominations. There have also been reports that the authorities are making increased use of short-term detentions as opposed to long spells in prison, a tactic which CSW believes is being deployed to deflect international attention from the ongoing harassment of pastors.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We strongly condemn the official pressure on church leaders in Cuba to deny pastoral support to certain members of their congregations because of their political affiliations. We call on the Cuban government to cease their interference in the internal affairs of religious organizations and in particular to uphold the right of religious leaders to minister to all regardless of their political beliefs."

Notes to Editors:

1. Pastor Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso has also been the target of government persecution. Over the past year the leadership of the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba has come under pressure from the government to remove him because of his refusal to deny pastoral support to human rights activists including Sakharov Prize winner, Guillermo Farinas. He is the author of the blog <http://en.cubanoconfesante.com>

2. The statement from the Methodist Church and an open letter by Pastor Yordi Toranzo are available on request in Spanish and in English.