

# Cuba: Testimony of a Prisoner of Conscience

by Ronald Geraty

---

*Eight days after his release from the Cuban prison where he had been held for 22 years, Humberto Noble Alexander, an Adventist ordained as a local elder, agreed to be interviewed by Ronald Geraty, M.D., a graduate of Loma Linda University School of Medicine and now the medical director of Fuller Memorial Hospital in Massachusetts.*

*One of 48 prisoners whose release Jesse Jackson obtained, Alexander had arrived in Boston on June 30 to be greeted by his older sister Paulina and his mother Berle. Two pastors sent by the local conference were also on hand to welcome Alexander.*

*Alexander was released following Jesse Jackson's negotiations with Castro. The significance of the release has been debated in the public press. Some have seen it as the result of skillful negotiating by the Reverend Jesse Jackson and evidence of Fidel Castro's willingness to open a dialogue with the U.S. On the other hand, some (including many of the prisoners themselves) see Fidel Castro as having used Jackson to demonstrate his magnanimity and to influence world public opinion.*

*Of the prisoners released, Alexander has been the most quoted and the most interviewed. He had just completed six hours of interviews by local, national, and international press when Spectrum interviewed him. In spite of this tiring schedule, he walked into the room with outstretched arms saying, "Finally, I am with brothers."*

*Inexplicably, though there had been an outpouring of interest and support from the world, national, and local press since his release, he had been visited by only four Seventh-day Adventists: the pastor from the Spanish church in Dorchester had brought him a Spanish Bible and a new Sabbath School quarterly, and three "sisters" from the local Seventh-day Adventist church had come to greet him.*

*As he spoke, there was a radiance in Alexander's face and excitement in his hoarse voice. His elderly mother sat in the room listening proudly and his sister often chimed in with information. Neither his sister nor his mother are Seventh-day Adventists. Both described his religion as "his own thing and he can do what he wants with that." He described how messages, letters, and news were smuggled in and out of jail and how the Bible used for worship services was hidden and retrieved. Some of his answers to Geraty's questions were "off the record" at his request.*

*According to his fellow prisoners, Alexander was a spiritual leader and counselor to them. The Wall Street Journal reported that when his prisonmates were depressed, they went to Alexander and he consoled them, letting them know that there was meaning to their suffering. The Boston Globe reported that Alexander was an organizer and leader of the underground church in jail.*

*In 1959, the revolution led by Fidel Castro overthrew the government. In 1961, Fidel Castro declared himself a communist and in the*

*same year repelled an attack of Cubans and Americans in the Bay of Pigs. Less than a year later, President John F. Kennedy blockaded Cuba and forced the Russians to keep Cuba free of nuclear weapons.*

—The Editors

**Geraty:** You must be glad to be free. How does it feel?

**Alexander:** Surely, I am. I feel like I was in a long sleep and have just awakened after 22 years. I am 50 years old now. Worn out as you can see.

**Geraty:** It has been reported in the newspapers that you served as a minister of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Cuba. When did you become a pastor?

**Alexander:** I was ordained an elder while I was in jail in 1980. I was in the Combinado del Este Jail. I was ordained by Pastor Pedro d'Arma. He was president of the Seventh-day Adventists in Havana. He ordained me just before he left the jail so that I could minister to my fellow prisoners. Before that time I was a deacon in the church in Marianao. Marianao is a section of Havana. There I was an assistant to Pastor Bascus.

**Geraty:** What kind of work were you doing before you went to jail?

**Alexander:** I owned my own workshop in Havana. I was a mechanic, a welder, and a rigger.

**Geraty:** When and how did you become a Seventh-day Adventist?

**Alexander:** I'll tell you, that's a long time ago. I was around 18 or 19 years old. I was living in the city of Guantanamo. There I met a Seventh-day Adventist family and became a Seventh-day Adventist.

**Geraty:** Wasn't there an American armed forces base in Guantanamo?

**Alexander:** Yes. Once I worked there, long before Castro's government. It was in 1950 when I became acquainted with the captain of the base. He was the base commander and he said he would get a job for

me. I worked first as a caddy at the golf course and then later as a mechanic. About 1953, I stopped working there.

**Geraty:** Then what did you do?

**Alexander:** Well, I went to Havana and found a family, the Lamberts, who were contractors in steel buildings. I began working with them and Mr. Lambert formed a small company of steel work contractors. He taught me how to be an entrepreneur and I prepared my own workshop. It was at that time that I began to work with Pastor Bascus in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Havana.

---

**As quickly as the revolution came, we began to see many changes that weren't right, but we were told to remember to preach the Gospel and not to meddle in political affairs.**

---

**Geraty:** How did the Seventh-day Adventist Church view the government of Batista at that time?

**Alexander:** I didn't think much about politics, but at that time the Seventh-day Adventist Church had no problem with the government. Of course, there were some people who had personal problems. I would visit a home and a parent would tell me, "Look, my son is having this problem with the government." I would say, "Well, I will speak to your son and see what I can do to give him an aiding hand and keep him apart from that problem." No. I would say that we had no feelings about the government at that time. I would try to help people with their problems, but they were just routine problems with the government, I think.

**Geraty:** What about the Castro government, beginning with the revolution? What impact did the revolution have on the Seventh-day Adventist Church and your work in Cuba?

**Alexander:** I'll tell you. There was direct persecution from the very beginning; we knew that our church was being visited by

members of G2, the security and intelligence service. We knew that they were there checking out everything. Well my church, I'm going to tell you the truth, was appalled from political fear. I used to speak with Pastor Bascus and we would say we didn't like this new government. As quickly as the revolution came we began to see many different changes that weren't right, but Pastor Bascus would say, "Remember we are here to preach the gospel and give the gospel to the people and not meddle in political affairs in the government." After Castro, I began to see churches being used as warehouses and then I knew what was coming. It was not everything at first, but little-by-little.

**Geraty:** Who was in charge of the Seventh-day Adventist churches in Cuba before the revolution?

**Alexander:** Let's see, I am not certain. It was either a Pastor Riffle or a Pastor Jacobs.

**Geraty:** Were they Americans?

**Alexander:** Yes.

**Geraty:** How did the church leadership change after the revolution?

**Alexander:** Well, I believe it was Pastor Bascus from Havana who was in charge of the church.

**Geraty:** How were these changes viewed by the Cuban Seventh-day Adventists?

**Alexander:** More or less the same. These changes were not part of our problems.

**Geraty:** Tell me, how were you jailed?

**Alexander:** Remember, I was living in Marianao, and I had family friends in Guantanamo. I used to travel sometimes to other places, for instance, campmeetings. I sang with a quartet, and we used to travel all over Cuba. I was returning from a campmeeting by myself. I was coming to look for a member of the quartet. On my way I saw two cars, one ahead and one behind, but I continued. The one ahead slowed down, and I stopped. As soon as I stopped, he backed up and said, "Are you Noble?" I said, "Yes. My name is Humberto Noble." He said, "Would you mind accompanying me to headquarters for five minutes?" I said,

"O.K. why not?" We went to headquarters, and the five minutes extended until one week ago. That is a long five minutes.

**Geraty:** What did they charge you with?

**Alexander:** They said they were charging me with several different things. They said that I was going to Guantanamo to go to the base to see a guy they called McDonald. The other charge was that I was taking out counter-revolutionaries and smuggling them out of the country. The counter-revolutionaries were people the government was seeking, and I was charged with smuggling them out of the country by the base. The third charge was that I was going to Guantanamo to get a bomb to kill Castro. To this day, I do not know which one of the three charges was the final charge.

**They put me in the dungeon, a small room with an iron plate door; no light was allowed inside; there was only room to lie down.**

**Geraty:** So the reasons they gave for putting you in jail really had nothing to do with religion?

**Alexander:** That's it. Any time they were going to, they never charged you directly. All the charges they brought up were for something else. For example, I have seen persons charged for crimes they didn't know anything about.

**Geraty:** Who was this man McDonald?

**Alexander:** I don't know McDonald and never knew a McDonald.

**Geraty:** Did you have the impression that the real reason they were putting you in jail had something to do with your religion?

**Alexander:** I am certain of it. Once I was delivering a message; I was preaching about the origin of sin. I told how Lucifer taught the other angels that they were equal because they were all celestial beings and all had the same rights in heaven. For that, he rebelled with the other angels, and he was thrown to earth, and when he came to earth,

he tried to do the same thing as he did in heaven, saying that all are equal. They said that by this, I was referring to Castro. They asked me, "What do you mean by this?" I explained to them that I was preaching strictly from the Bible. You can say that the Bible was referring to Castro, but you cannot say that Noble Alexander was referring to Castro. But it made no difference. Once they see something from their point of view, it's unchangeable, they don't need proof. They said they wanted my conviction.

**Geraty:** Was there a trial?

**Alexander:** The court case was made up by the G2. The G2 told me that I was going to be in jail for 20 years for this. Of course, there was a trial, but I was not allowed to talk.

**Geraty:** But you've been in jail for more than 22 years.

**Alexander:** Yes. But I was condemned according to their papers for 20 years only. After 20 years, they just left me there. I'm not the only one; there are a lot. Among those of us just released, 26 served more than 21 years, but all 26 were sentenced to 20 years. All 26 of us served more years than that.

**Geraty:** Were there other religious people in jail with you?

**Alexander:** Yes, there were.

**Geraty:** What other religions did they represent, and why were they put in jail?

**Alexander:** Well, for example, there were Pentecostals, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and more. There was a Pastor David Fite from Georgia. He was released and deported from the country.

**Geraty:** Why were they released and you kept?

**Alexander:** They were strangers to the country, and I was Cuban. There used to be Americans there, but a lot of them were released in 1980.

**Geraty:** Are there other Seventh-day Adventists in jail now?

**Alexander:** Where I was before being released there were none. But they were in different places, in other prisons. Some of

the others have been released.

**Geraty:** Why were they released and you kept?

**Alexander:** Well, they used to do general work, but I was considered a Plantado. Plantados are rebels.

**Geraty:** Why were you labelled a Plantado?

**He said, "Would you mind accompanying me to headquarters for five minutes?" We went to headquarters and the five minutes extended to 22 years. That is a long five minutes.**

**Alexander:** I prepared a small pulpit for my religious services, which is not permitted. As quickly as the guards were out of our section we would prepare another pulpit and would have more services. When the cells were opened for lunch, we would stay behind and have our religious services. When the others came back we would have finished our services and nobody would know the difference.

**Geraty:** Were you able to have Bibles in prison?

**Alexander:** Well, I had a Bible given to me by Melvin Bailey. I had another small Bible that I call my Bible of Testimonies that has been with me for over 30 years. We hid the Bible in several sections of the prison. I sent the Bible to another section because they didn't have one. We tied the Bible to a small string and would pull the string between the different sections to get the Bible. One time a guard saw it, and he tried to get the Bible. I told him, "This is my Bible and I'm not going to give it to you." They searched for the Bible, and when they couldn't find it (we had hidden it behind the sewer), they put me in the dungeon.

**Geraty:** What was the dungeon?

**Alexander:** The dungeon is a small cell with an iron plate door; no light is allowed inside; there is only room to lie down. There is just a small slit in the door that is cut out

so that you can have your meals given to you.

**Geraty:** How long were you in the dungeon?

**Alexander:** For not giving them the Bible? Two years.

**Geraty:** Two years, for having a Bible? So while you were being rebellious you were put in this cell for two years, and all this time the Bible was behind the sewer.

**Alexander:** No. Others were using the Bible. Everybody knew how to find it. Evening services continued at sunset every evening. We used the Bible at prayer meetings every evening at sunset.

**Geraty:** Did you worship only with other Seventh-day Adventists or with people from other religions?

**Alexander:** The only ones who didn't worship together were the Jehovah's Witnesses. They kept completely apart. Even the Catholics worshipped with us. We would have our services with them, and they would

Sometimes we were given pork, but I refused to eat it. My brothers said they didn't know how I was going to manage not eating without getting sick, but I told them, "You mind yourself and leave me alone."

have their masses with us. Then we began an arrangement where I would have a service one day and they would take the service the next day. Somebody would always be responsible for watching for the guards and making sure that the guards were not coming.

**Geraty:** Were there ever any problems worshipping with people of different religions?

**Alexander:** No. I don't care what church you visit. I don't care what religion you practice, if your heart is like mine and Jesus is your saviour. Then we are brothers. That is the theme we used in our general services. But then there were other studies too. These

we called our Sabbath School quarterlies.

**Geraty:** You had Sabbath School quarterlies in jail?

**Alexander:** Yes, we had them in jail. Of course, they were smuggled in, and our Sabbath School quarterlies were not like the ones you have here. They were typed pages we would tear up and you keep one, I keep one, and somebody else would keep the other, and then we would study them like that. When I finished one page, I would pass it to someone and then he would pass it on to somebody else and we would pass them all around.

**Geraty:** What do you think is the experience of the others, now that you have left?

**Alexander:** Their experiences are the same. We have all seen many leavings. When I left, they told me, "Noble, we want you to speak without being afraid. We don't care what you say about this. Don't mind the revenge that they take on us, you just try to make everyone know what is happening here."

**Geraty:** Tell me what your jail was like, food, room, visitors, and other things.

**Alexander:** I shared my room with five others. The rooms were all prepared for eight people, and were approximately nine feet by 12 feet. Some of the rooms were even smaller than that. I was one of the lucky guys. The beds were on top of each other and around the room. It was in the middle of the room that we would hold our evening masses and worships. We called them the "setting sun prayers."

**Geraty:** Was everyone in your room religious?

**Alexander:** Well, I wouldn't say everybody, but everybody assisted whether they were religious or not. Only one wasn't religious, but he would stay there and listen.

**Geraty:** Was everyone in your room a Plantado?

**Alexander:** Yes. In my section, everybody in the whole section, about 60 people, were Plantados.

My food was wheat and fish. But the fish

they gave us was caught sometimes seven, eight, or 10 years ago. It looked very strange. It was frozen fresh and when it became unfrozen it rotted. They would try to fry it to the utmost, but as quick as you opened it, the meat inside was like sand. I wouldn't touch it and still I cannot eat it yet. We were

---

**In Cuba, the law is one thing if it is written down, but another if it is followed and carried out.**

---

given Russian meat. When the meat became outdated and the Cuban armed forces could no longer eat it, then they gave it to us. Sometimes we were given pork, but I refused to eat it. My brothers would say they didn't know how I was going to manage not eating without getting sick, but I told them, "I don't know what is making me live, but I am living and I am not sick, so you mind yourself and leave me alone." They gave us something white that they called milk. It was white, but it was not milk. They gave us bread at every meal. The rice they gave us always had worms and was military supplies that had gotten too old.

You also asked about visitors. In 22 years in jail I had no visitors for 17 years, including the last four years. The time when we had visitors regularly was during what they called the Carter Dialogue. During the dialogue, things got smoother. We got two hour visits every 45 days. They kept thinking that we were going to have a visit from the Carter people or from the Red Cross.

**Geraty:** Who would visit you?

**Alexander:** A lady from the Adventist church who calls herself Alexander also. She came as my mother. Another Adventist, another good friend came; her name was Gonzales. They both came to visit me.

**Geraty:** What type of news were you given from the outside world?

**Alexander:** The Americans were on the other side of the jail and they received generally two visits every 45 days: one of the visits was from the embassy and one was from

family or friends. We had a code for speaking. We could speak from nearly a block away. When the doors were open for lunch, they would stand at one end of the jail, and we would stand at the other end and watch. From there they would give us news through hand signals and sign language.

**Geraty:** I'd like to return to the subject of your refusing work. It has been reported in the press that prisoners are allowed to work; and that the government pays them for their work.

**Alexander:** Yes. That is partly true. The trouble is how do you get to the point where you can get paid? They would take you to a plant and put you to work. You were told that you wouldn't get any pay until you worked six months. After six months you began to get paid, but 90 percent of the political prisoners would work for five months and then be released for bad behavior and another group would come in and not get paid. Why work?

**Geraty:** Did you ever work?

**Alexander:** No. I was a Plantado. I was described as rebellious and Plantados had no opportunity to work. Even if I had had the opportunity to work and they had wanted me to work, I wouldn't work, because I knew what was going on.

**Geraty:** I still don't exactly understand why you refused.

**Alexander:** They used work for money as a means of indoctrination. I was glad to work for free and I did work. For example, I taught others English and I helped them with their French and so forth. I helped them with mathematics. Some of us were able to sew, others to write, and so forth. We exchanged knowledge with one another, and we helped each other. When I say we didn't work, that just means that we didn't work for the government, because we did work very hard for each other.

**Geraty:** I understand that according to the Cuban Constitution of 1975, everyone is free to practice his or her own religion within the framework of the law. What is your understanding of that?

**Alexander:** I had a Russian constitution once. I was called in because they wanted to search my parcel post. We used to lose a lot of things during those searches and so I said, "I'm not signing my card permitting you to search my parcels." I showed the guard my Russian constitution saying that no one can search prisoners' letters and parcels. He took the book and hit me on the head and said, "This is Cuba and we do what we want to do." With this I show you that what is written in the book is only written there; people do what they want to do. It is one thing if the verse is written, but another if it is followed and carried out.

**Geraty:** You said that at various points during your time in jail you were visited by some Seventh-day Adventists. Did they do anything to try to help you get out of jail?

---

**Smuggled letters were pieces of paper approximately 3 inches by 5 inches, written with a fine point pen in writing so small that it could not be read without a magnifying glass.**

---

**Alexander:** They knew if they tried to help me, they would get themselves in trouble also. I knew a communist who was living right in front of my workshop in Havana; before the present government came into power, I had helped him a lot. At that time, I did not know that he was a member of the Communist Party. After I went to prison he went to the government and said, "This man, Noble Alexander, who is in jail, this is one of the mistakes that the revolution is committing. I know Alexander for a long time, and I can see him working in his workshop. All he does is go from work to church to home." You know what they told this good man? "Keep yourself quiet if you don't want to get yourself in trouble." Now, he was a member of the Communist Party and even he had to keep himself quiet. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church would definitely have gotten into trouble if they helped me. Of course, they did help me,

they gave me strength with their prayers. This was all the help that I needed.

**Geraty:** But you said that sometimes some of your friends smuggled you Sabbath School quarterlies or literature.

**Alexander:** Yes. But I cannot tell you how that was done, because it continues to this day. We would smuggle things in and we would smuggle things out. I used to write my family. I would think that letters had been lost because I hardly ever got an answer. As I said, it was easier to get them out than it was to get them in. So I would always write three times and send them out different ways (At this point Mr. Alexander produced a packet of many letters, that he had written while he was in jail, that had been smuggled out. Each letter was on a small piece of paper approximately 3 inches by 5 inches, written with a fine point pen with letters so small that they obviously could not be read without the aid of a magnifying glass. These letters have been saved by his sister through the years and provide him with a chronology of his experiences.).

**Geraty:** Last year, a Jehovah's Witness reported that there was an American Seventh-day Adventist minister in jail. Could that have been you?

**Alexander:** Yes. It's possible. Sometimes I jumped over to the American section when there was no guard around and I would hold services with them. Some of the Cubans would listen to me speaking English and they believed that I was an American, and so some people confused me with being American. However, I am not American and I did not present myself as American.

**Geraty:** What do you see as the mission of the Seventh-day Adventists in Cuba?

**Alexander:** They are having a very hard time now. One of the pastors there sent me a message that he is having troubles morning, noon, and night. He wants to leave the country. He told me that if I could ever get myself a visa to any country other than Cuba, that I should get the visa as soon as possible. The Seventh-day Adventists who are left behind are having a very difficult

time. I cannot say what the mission of the church is in Cuba other than to preach the gospel.

---

**I am just waiting for God to lead me. I have no plans for myself. God will lead.**

---

**Geraty:** Are you aware of what happened to Seventh-day Adventists in Cuba in 1980 and that many of them left at that time?

**Alexander:** Yes. They fled the country seeking religious freedom, yet the church now needs pastors and workers. There is work to do; we need to work now.

**Geraty:** What are your first impressions of the United States?

**Alexander:** I cannot say. This has been a complete change for me. It's like being asleep for 23 years and suddenly waking. I tell you, I cannot describe my impressions.

**Geraty:** How was it, yesterday, to be in the United States on the Fourth of July?

**Alexander:** It is unbelievable, just unbelievable.

**Geraty:** Will you be celebrating on Castro's Cuban Independence Day, July 26?

**Alexander:** Don't speak about this. This is not a holiday, it is a day of mourning. Believe me this is a tragedy, there is nothing to celebrate.

**Geraty:** What are you going to do now that you are a free man?

**Alexander:** I am just waiting for God to lead me. I have no plans for myself. God will lead.