

## **Miami: The war for Elián**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Miami, FL—The entrance of the National Council of Churches into the politically charged wrangle over Elián González has many evangelical leaders in Miami up in arms. Some 15 pastors issued a strong statement separating themselves and their churches from the NCC's action.

Referring to the Joan Brown Campbell, the NCC's former General Secretary who has been at the forefront of the Council's activity, Pastor Misael Castillo, pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church and secretary of the Greater Miami Hispanic Pastor's Association, a fellowship that includes non-Cuban pastors says, "We are very bothered by this woman who has wanted to represent the (Protestant) church without the agreement of its members."

"In a way we have been pressured into speaking out," Castillo says. "They have stepped into the political arena and have alienated the entire Cuban community. Our parishioners are asking, 'where are the evangelical, Protestant pastors (in Miami) when she says she is speaking for all Protestants?'"

Referring to "Operation Peter Pan," an organized effort in the early 1960's that brought 14,048 unaccompanied children between six and 18 from Cuba to the U.S. for resettlement, Castillo calls Elián another Peter Pan type of child. "We believe that sending Elián back to Cuba is sending him back to no future."

Elián was found clinging to an inner tube off the Florida coast on Thanksgiving day following an ill-fated escape from Cuba that left his mother, his step-father and nine other Cubans dead. Since then, he has been cared for by family members in Miami who have taken legal action to prevent his return to what they and others in the Cuban exile community term a "communist, oppressive regime"

Since his rescue, his father and other family members in Cuba have pleaded that he be sent home. The INS ruled in January that the boy should be returned to his father, a move that sparked violent street demonstrations in Miami. A Florida family court granted temporary custody to the boy's great uncle in Miami pending a hearing in March while bills were introduced into congress to grant Elián citizenship. Meanwhile, government-organized marches were held in Cuba demanding the boy's return.

While tensions simmered in both countries, efforts were made to mediate and return the boy to his father. The endeavor was organized by the National Council of Churches at the request of Rev. Oden Marichal, president of the Cuban National Council of Churches. The two groups have a working relationship that dates back to before the Cuban revolution.

Originally, the two councils planned that Elián would be released to an NCC representative who would escort him back to Havana and turn him over to the Cuban

organization. Carol Fouke, an NCC official in New York, says that both Washington and Havana had agreed to that plan. But legal maneuvers by Elián's Miami relatives designed to keep the boy in the United States interfered with that early idea.

Later, a new strategy was developed, again with the tacit approval of the two governments. The church councils decided that Elián's grandmothers, Mariela Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez, would be ideal escorts with the NCC's help.

NCC General Secretary Dr. Robert Edgar and Campbell visited Elián's family members in Cuba and later brought the two grandmothers to the U.S. to make a dramatic appeal in the court of American public opinion, hoping to show the Miami relatives that national sentiment was building against them.

"This is not a healthy situation for the boy," Edgar says. "Make no mistake. The NCC is unequivocally in favor of reuniting the boy with his father and closest family members. This child needs his father and he needs him now."

NCC officials made several flights to Cuba and flew Elián's grandmothers to and around the United States in a private Lear Jet. Michael Keister, president of the Miami-based aircraft leasing company Atlantic Flight Group says that normally a Lear Jet rents for around \$2,200 per hour when in flight, including the pilot.

The 50-year-old ecumenical body is struggling to overcome a \$3.2 million operating debt. The organization has cut staff and asked member denominations to help bail it out. In December, the United Methodist Church lifted a two-month suspension of funding to the ecumenical organization that it had imposed while seeking an explanation of the NCC's financial woes.

Diane Knippers, President of The Institute on Religion and Democracy charges the ecumenical council with bias and asks how it can objectively arbitrate the dispute. Pointing to NCC praise of the Cuban Revolution while ignoring Cuban President Fidel Castro's human rights abuses, Knippers says, "The NCC has remained silent about Castro's continuing restrictions on religious activity in Cuba."

"There are other religious organizations that could serve as effective mediators in this difficult situation, putting the boy's interests above political considerations," Knippers says. "But the Castro-friendly NCC is not one of them."

Knippers also charges that the Council has not been an active proponent of family values in the United States and says "it seems odd that it should suddenly take an interest in family values in this situation."

Others in the Miami exile community are calling Elián a Messiah. An editorial cartoon in a Little Havana newspaper shows Elián floating in the sea on his inner tube. Around him leap schools of dolphins while two angels watch over him from above.

José Marmol, a columnist for another Spanish-language paper compares the boy to Moses, set adrift by a mother who hoped to spare his life. “Moses lived to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Israel, an exodus that lasted 40 years—about the same as our exile from Cuba,” he says.

“Many see (the boy) as the messenger of a miraculous mission to return to liberty the suffering Cuban people,” Marmol wrote.

“He’s a miracle,” says Maria Rodriguez, one of many pilgrims who pass by Elián’s Little Havana home each day. “The fact that he made it for two days, with dolphins circling around him—that proves he’s a miracle.”

“I have a feeling that he will be the one who brings change to the history of Cuba,” says Mirta Rondón, an exile who fled Cuba 31 years ago.

The NCC’s Edgar reflected a similar sentiment when he said, “I’m hopeful that this tragic situation can have a positive effect. Elián Gonzalez could be the catalyst for a changed relationship between the peoples of Cuba and the U.S. His safe return should mark a commitment to finding ways to be more caring and generous with each other.”

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