

NEWS RELEASE
Wednesday, January 9, 2008

ASHEVILLE CONGREGATION SENDS DELEGATION TO CUBA

Late Wednesday afternoon, January 9, 11 members of the Circle of Mercy Congregation piled into two vans, heading for Charlotte, where they will catch a Thursday morning flight to Havana, Cuba, to spend a week visiting their “sister” congregation in the city of Camagüey.

The relation between Circle of Mercy and Iglesia Getsemani began nearly three years ago when several members traveled to Cuba to visit a variety of congregations there. The group was hosted by the leadership of the Fraternity de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba (Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba), which has a partnership with the Alliance of Baptists here in the U.S.

In October 2006 a second delegation from Circle of Mercy traveled to Cuba specifically to invite the pastor and members of Iglesia Getsemani to enter this partnership.



Early in 2007 efforts were made to bring the pastor and a lay leader from Camagüey to Asheville for a visit, but the U.S. State Department refused to provide visas.

“We have found various ways to carry on our relationship with our friends at Iglesia Getsemani,” says Kiran Sigmon, an Asheville doctor and chair of Circle of Mercy Cuba Partner Mission Group. “Last year we were able to provide Angelita (Rev. Angela Hernández, Getsemani’s pastor) with a computer in order to establish e-mail contact. We’ve taken some basic medicines and school supplies, as well as posters, cards and bookmarks that our children have created. But there’s no substitute for face-to-face meeting,” Sigmon said.

Camagüey, Cuba’s third-largest city, is located in the eastern part of the island nation, about an eight-hour drive from Havana.

Previously, Circle of Mercy was able to travel to Cuba on a U.S. Treasury Department travel permit issued to the Alliance of Baptists, since the U.S. embargo against Cuba restricts most travel by U.S. citizens. However, in late 2006 the Treasury Department revoked the Alliance’s permit, along with those of many other Christian denominations and other nonprofit organizations. In the spring of 2007 Circle of Mercy applied for and received its own travel permit.

One of Circle of Mercy’s co-pastors, Ken Sehested, is among the travelers this week, as are three of the children in the congregation. “Having both adults and children participate in this relationship is important to us,” Sehested said.

Founded in 2001, Circle of Mercy Congregation is affiliated nationally with the Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ. It’s co-pastors are The Revs. Joyce Hollyday, Ken Sehested, and Nancy Hastings Sehested.