

Humbling, Sacred Moments: A Report on One Congregation's Visit to Cuba

By Beth Maczka

My introduction to Cuba started with a church skit. The skit included 6 chairs set up as a van, frantic singing of "Alabare, alabare" ("O Praise the Lord"), a series of church meetings and stops for Cuban roadside cheese.

I was impressed with this first delegation of travelers from my congregation, including two children, who visited a series of potential church partners. However, a sister-church partnership did not seem particularly relevant to me. Local social service priorities, limited time and budget constraints made me wonder what we were getting into. Yet I was intrigued by the description of a small Baptist congregation, pastored by a Cuban African woman, that borrowed space from a small Episcopal church—and worshiped on Saturdays because the building was used on Sundays. The parallels to our small rag-tag congregation were significant and the partnership soon seemed destined.

Fast-forward a couple of years, and I was invited to consider joining a delegation to Cuba to visit our sister church, Iglesia Getsemani in Camagüey. Perhaps it was the chance to take my daughter to a developing country or perhaps it was the presence of some of my closest friends, but I took the plunge and I'll never be the same.

I knew virtually nothing of Cuba and devoured a recommended book about Cuba (*Perspectives on Cuba and Its People* by Theodore Braun, Friendship Press). We were also fortunate to have a visit from Alliance of Baptists director Stan Hastey who shared knowledge gained from over 20 trips to Cuba. I quickly became intrigued with the brief history and the descriptions of some of the reforms instituted since the revolution. Housing for all, 97% literacy, a doctor, nurse and social worker for every neighborhood.....I couldn't wait to learn more and see it for myself.

The whole trip became a lesson in Cuban history and foreign policy through the eyes of our hosts, the *Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas* (Fraternity of Baptist Churches). Founded in 1989 after three congregations of the Western Baptist Convention (mission partner of the Southern Baptist Convention) were expelled—for many of the same reasons Southern Baptist congregations in the U.S. get ousted—the Fraternity now has 42 congregations spread across the island nation and is a member of the Baptist World Alliance. Some two dozen of those are linked in partnership with Alliance of Baptists (and a few Cooperative Baptist) congregations in the U.S.

Every pastor we met along the way (we made multiple stops) added to our understanding of the Cuban history and life in the churches. Each day of our travels the three children (ages 9-10) who accompanied us focused on learning about key figures in Cuban history, starting with Bartolomé de las Casas, a 16th century Dominican priest who opposed the Spanish enslavement of the indigenous Taino people, all the way up to Rev. Raúl Suárez, long-time pastor of Ebenezer Baptist in Havana.

Suárez, who 20 years ago founded the Martin Luther King Center (next to Ebenezer), was our first host. A conscientious objector and strongly committed to non-violence, he nevertheless drove an ambulance for Cuba's army and was wounded during the 1961 U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion. This small man later became in 1992 the first Christian elected to the Cuban National Assembly. (Several pastors and one seminary professor now serve in such posts.) Suárez continues to promote the Gospel vision of social justice and is a bridge between the Communist Party of Cuba and the Christian community.

We learned that Rev. Angela Hernández, our pastor-host in Camagüey, taught reading and writing in the countryside for two years as an 18-year-old college student, as was required of students after the Revolution. She later became a secondary school teacher and more recently, became ordained as a Baptist minister.

We saw faith in action, as this small congregation, with minimal resources, ministers to a large constituency of people living with various disabilities. Frequent home visits to pray and sing bring hope to the home bound. We visited in homes and drank delicious Cuban coffee and ate guava paste with cheese. We were startled by the presence of American TV shows (including "Desperate Housewives" at one stop!) in even the most modest and rural homes. We shared prayers and songs and gifts and stories.

We saw that people had most of what they needed and very few extras. Housing was modest

and often needing repairs. Food ration cards provide the basics but don't always stretch to the end of the month. We learned of the hardships caused by the U.S. embargo and the challenges faced by an economy that has turned to tourism. We learned that doctors, engineers and teachers are leaving their careers to get jobs as bell hops and taxi drivers in Havana where they can get far more in tips in a month than they would in a year's salary. In fact, we met a man in Havana who had taught high school in Camagüey but now works for tips at the feet of the statue of Jesus Christ that overlooks Havana. The realities of the economic challenges and the contradictions boggle my mind.

We said goodbye to our friends in Camagüey with a foot washing ritual. Ken Sehested, our co-pastor, invited us to wash each other's feet as Christ washed the feet of the disciples—noting that we were all servants of Christ and of each other. I washed my daughter's feet and then helped her wash Pastora Angelita's. We sang songs in Spanish and English as we each took a turn sitting at the bench and then kneeling before the basin.

It was a humbling and sacred and precious moment. It felt like a confession of sin, baptism and communion all rolled into one. And I will never be the same.

Beth Maczka traveled to Cuba in January 2008 with 10 others from the Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, N.C. She works for the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina as a Program Officer.