

## **Cuba Reflections**

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The morning shower. It's a commodity most of us take for granted in the United States. But in Cuba things are different. Some mornings we either had no water, or only a trickle would come out of the showerhead. The next morning we would have plenty of water, but it was freezing cold. However, when we had water and it was hot, the experience reflected the beauty of the land and its people.

The above description is a good metaphor for Cuba. There the contrasts and ambiguities are extreme. Beautiful, immaculate tree-lined streets surrounded by well-kept homes abut against dilapidated neighborhoods that have not seen a can of paint in decades. Vintage 40s and 50s American-made vehicles, kept running by the Cubans' inventiveness and creativity, share streets full of potholes with new European models. People either struggle to make ends meet with their meager 350 Cuban *pesos* per month salaries (\$14), standing in long lines to purchase bread, rice or beans, or splurge eating first rate meals in *paladares*—small, neighborhood restaurants mainly patronized by tourists—and paying with dollars. These are the signs of the “double economy” allowed by the Cuban government after the demise of the Soviet and Eastern European Communist Block, Cuba's main allies and suppliers for many years.

I went back to Cuba for the first time since I left 37 years ago, invited by the Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada en Cuba (Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba/IPRC) to participate in a Theological Symposium on Partnership as well as their annual Asamblea Sinodial (Synod Assembly). The relationship between PC(USA) and the Cuban Church has a 114-year history. Mission coworker for Cuba, the Reverend Tricia Lloyd-Sidle, facilitated the trip and coordinated the symposium, along with a Cuban pastor, the Reverend Ary Fernandez. Other PC(USA) staff from Louisville, KY, mission coworkers, and representatives of PC(USA) presbyteries and congregations who have entered in partnership with Cuban churches also participated in the symposium. The symposium itself dealt mainly with the issues of partnership in mission. However, other themes emerged during the conversations that covered an entire gamut of theological and practical issues important for the better understanding between the two churches in the midst of an uncertain political landscape. During the synod assembly, the visitors from the PC(USA), which included the Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, were welcomed as corresponding members.

While my time in Cuba was brief, barely eight days, the experiences and emotions were very intense. I had never expected to see my old neighborhood again where I spent the first fourteen years of my life. Visiting with old friends and acquaintances brought back many good memories of a united and loving family whose life was disrupted by the political process.

I made it a point to engage in conversations with taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant workers, and just plain people on the streets. However, most of my contacts were with lay and clergy members of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba. And of course, as in all contexts,

our partner church in Cuba also reflects the tensions and contrasts of the society in which it lives and ministers.

In Cuba, the church is going through a period of growth, no doubt prompted by the need for people to find meaning in the midst of their complex society. After decades of absence when many churches were forced to close its doors, people are flocking back, thirsty to hear the Word of God and to share in the fellowship found in the community of faith. It helps also that the church in Cuba is becoming more responsible for providing social services once exclusively the pervue of the socialist government. Cuts in resources, both a product of the U.S.-imposed embargo and the absence of Soviet help, prompted this shift. The Catholic Church, as well as the many evangelical groups and Protestant denominations, experience this revival. Leaders of the more than 14,000-member Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba told me that approximately seventy percent of their members are new to the church. This creates new challenges for pastors and church leaders who strive to serve their communities in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Particularly, I witnessed the many ministries provided to the low-income, mostly Afro-Cuban population in the center of Havana by the Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada. Under the leadership of its pastor, the Reverend Hector Mendez, this thriving congregation organizes home Bible studies, prayer meetings, youth activities, tutoring, social services, and meaningful worship services. Most Sundays, extra chairs need to be placed throughout the building—the first church building especially built for a Protestant congregation in Cuba back in 1906.

I was very impressed by all the Cuban pastors that I met, both women and men. The synergism created by the realities of daily lives and the challenges of the gospel has developed into what a prominent leader of the Cuban Church described as a *teologia de las cazuelas*, which loosely translated means “a theology of pots and pans.” In comparison with many of us ministers and pastors in the United States who usually live above the socio-economic level of our parishioners, these pastors preach and minister not from plexiglass pulpits in air-conditioned sanctuaries, but from the food lines and hospitals and clinics without adequate medicine or equipment, sharing the frustrations of a people who suffer from the criminal embargo imposed by the United States on the island nation, as well as from the inadequacies of the Cuban government’s policies.

In Cuba, Christ is alive! The relationship between the PC(USA) and the IPRC is stronger than ever. Cuban Presbyterians particularly praise the PC(USA) for our support of the Cuban people’s right to self-determination in the midst of continuing threats by the present U.S. administration. The IPRC has chosen a policy of engagement with the Cuban government, which has resulted in more religious freedom and privileges for Cuban Christians. They decry the excesses of the revolutionary regime while defending social gains, such as socialized medicine, universal education, strong social safety nets, and the desire to develop a classless and just society, what they consider to be “characteristics of the Kingdom.”

Pray for Cuban Christians. Pray for Cuban pastors and leaders. Pray for the churches that minister holistically to the needs of their communities. Pray for the restoration of relations

between the United States and Cuba. Above all, pray for reconciliation between sisters and brothers in Christ, separated by only ninety miles of water, but thousands of miles of ideologies.