

Cuba 2020

Report from Delegation to CYM

From February 15-24 2020, Em McManamy, Bruce Neumann, Jackie Stillwell, and Marion Athearn visited with Cuban Friends and attended the Cuba Yearly Meeting (CYM) Sessions. Intervisitation was at the heart of the reason for our visit, and continues to be an essential component of the bridge we have built with Cuban Friends. While our presence presents challenges, this intervisitation both nurtures the relationships we have worked so lovingly to build and sends a clear message that Cuban Friends are an important part of our extended Quaker family.

Our visit was broken into two parts: residence at Puerto Padre and attendance at CYM Sessions in Gibara. Because of a severe gasoline shortage we were not able to travel to as many monthly meetings as we would have liked, but we enjoyed worship with Puerto Padre, Vista Alegre, and Delicias. In every case we found worship to be welcoming, joyful, and filled with love of, and for, the Holy Spirit. Each of us carried extra suitcases filled with medical supplies and material for first day school classes as well as messages from sister meetings. The supplies were received with much gratitude, as there are shortages of bandages, medicine, analgesics, and the like. A physician and ophthalmologist from the local clinic inventoried the prescription medications, eyeglasses, and sterile supplies for future dispensing, while the over-the-counter vitamins, analgesics, antibiotic creams, etc. were divided equally for distribution to each monthly meeting for use in their communities. A set of donated backpacks instantly became very useful. Jorge Luis Peña, clerk of CYM and who lives in Puerto Padre, helped navigate how the supplies would be fairly distributed. It was striking that in a culture with so many hardships, Friends' focus is clearly on supporting the entire community rather than on keeping resources for themselves individually. Puerto Padre feeds people twice a week, once on Sundays after worship and once on Wednesdays, providing food at the church and delivering to shut-ins. Holguín and Gibara offer clean water to those who bring clean containers and Gibara is actively supporting Pueblo Nuevo monthly meeting, only a mile away but in a very poor part of Gibara.



CYM Sessions began with an experiment proposed by Luis Carlos Jomarrón Rivero. For the first time they had workshops and evening interest groups. After a brief greeting from Jorge Luis Peña, the entire assembly broke into workshops: Finance (led by Odalis Hernán and assisted by Jackie), Communication (based on AVP exercises led by Em and Marion), The Mission of the Church, and Personal Evangelism. All of the workshops were well attended and well received. Interest groups were held in the evenings. We offered three interest groups: two on Puente and one on peace. Again, these were well attended and much appreciated by the attendees. Luis Carlos' experiment was a resounding success.

The CYM sessions were strongly grounded in worship, which was offered to the community three times a day. Monthly meetings took turns leading worship. In addition, each day of the sessions focused on a set of queries that emphasized a different spiritual focus: love, grace, and the Holy Spirit. These queries led to rich and personal sharing in worship. One aspect of Friends programmed worship that struck us most vividly is how open to the leadings of the Spirit the worship is. While there is a pastor who gives a message (although not always the official pastor of the monthly meeting) and hymns that are clearly planned ahead, song, prayer, and messages also rise up spontaneously from the body and are embraced and welcomed. Ministry is encouraged from all age groups, and we witnessed powerful ministry from children, including a beautiful dance by a 10 year old from Pueblo Nuevo. It is clear that Cuban Friends are working diligently to nurture spiritual understanding and expression in their young people. There is no sense of a rigid structure to which they adhere. The focus of every message and prayer we heard in worship was on God's love and the peace, power, and freedom it brings. When we asked Luis Carlos if there was ever a focus on evil he responded, "We have no time for Satan!". Clearly love reigns!



One of the highlights of the Sessions was the recognition of Ramon and Rosario for their work building and supporting the bridge with New England Friends. It was a poignant moment for all. That same evening, Bruce offered the message in worship, focusing on the story of the blind men and the elephant, with which Cubans are familiar. He spoke about how we can see (or choose to see) only part of the truth, referencing times when Quakers have revised their understanding of truth over time. He challenged us all with the question, "What truth am I not seeing?"

Our time with Cuban Friends was rich with sharing. We had many opportunities to connect one-on-one with Friends in many contexts. Sharing meals, sharing worship, hanging out with the kitchen crew in Gibara, offering our gifts and talents and receiving theirs in return all served to strengthen the bond that is so important to both New England and Cuban Friends. We are hopeful that sister meetings



can be found for Pueblo Nuevo, Delicias, and Floro Pérez, and recognize that intervisitation is key to keeping these relationships alive. In addition, Jackie offered suggestions for nurturing microenterprise projects, an initiative that Cuban Friends are actively exploring. There may be ways for New England Friends to support this in the future. We are grateful for this opportunity to travel, and return home with hearts full of love and grace.