



PLOWSHARES

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Cuba Traveling Seminar **March 9 – 18, 2004**

Introduction: Plowshares Institute promotes peaceful conflict resolution around the globe. One of the ways it does this is to provide traveling seminars to help US citizens better interpret their own commitments and values through increased understanding of countries currently prominent in US policy formation. With the goal of better understanding these issues, in March of 2004 fifteen of us traveled to Cuba to learn what we could about our neighbor to the south, just 90 miles from Key West.

Cuba is a country of 11 million people, about 1.5 million of whom live in Havana. In the brief time we were there we had the opportunity to speak with Cuban leaders about the state of Cuban politics, economics, religion, commerce, human rights, arts, culture, health, housing, and education. The delegation spent 4 nights in Havana and 5 nights in Matanzas, a large city of 100,000 people about 60 miles to the east of Havana on Cuba's northern coast.

During our ten days we listened to and learned from: government officials, faculty from the University of Havana and Matanzas Ecumenical Seminary, religious leaders, people of faith working to improve life for Cubans, physicians and other professionals, students, a representative of the U.S. Interests Section (the U.S. has no formal diplomatic relations with Cuba), and ordinary citizens. We walked the streets of Havana and Matanzas, observing, exchanging greetings, taking photos, and trying Cuban beer, coffee and ice cream. We experienced Cuban flamenco ballet, jazz, baroque music and popular songs.

What follows are some impressions of this country, its people and its government, formed from our brief encounter, and yet held with sufficient clarity to lead us to believe that they provide a source of guidance about how Cuba and the United States could and should be building bridges of respect, understanding, and cooperation. We left the country believing that we, as better-informed individuals, have much to contribute to the well being and enrichment of each other's societies.

Impressions: Briefly stated, we came away under the impression that:

- 1) The people we met with were decent, hard working, dedicated citizens who believe in their country and want to make it a better one. We were struck by their pride in their country's accomplishments and their commitment to Cuban society and group accomplishment rather than a focus on individual rights as found in the United States. Cubans were honest in sharing their points of view, and we received a variety of perspectives from meetings with individuals and small groups. In every setting, be it churches, homes, street corners or small shops, we experienced a gracious and unassuming hospitality.
- 2) Prior to the Revolution of 1959 Cuba was a society that benefited the wealthy few at the expense of the impoverished many. Today Cuba remains a poor country but its citizens do not live in the kind of destitute poverty typical of much of Latin America. The tide of the Revolution has caused the boats of the many to rise and basic social service delivery is better and more equitable than before the Revolution. Nearly universal adult literacy and an extensive health care delivery system testify to the planned economy's strengths, while frequent shortages of pharmaceuticals reveal its weaknesses. Huge gains in gender equality have also been realized under the revolutionary government. In 1959, 1 percent of university students were women, whereas in 2003, 57 percent were women.

- 3) Cubans who initially opposed the Revolution fled to the U.S. because of their loss of property and privilege. Many of those Cubans prospered in Florida and became the formidable national anti-Castro political lobby. Since 1980 most Cubans moving to the U.S. have done so, not for political reasons, but to improve their economic conditions and to support families still in Cuba through remittances.
- 4) Cuba's form of socialism has provided all citizens with at least modest housing, rationed quotas of basic foods, free health care and free education. We observed no evidence of homelessness and what little begging we saw was probably stimulated by the recent growth in tourism. In the cities we visited, Havana, Varadero and Matanzas, many buildings had remained unpainted for decades, yet there was a nearly complete lack of trash on any street or plaza. Salaries to cover other needs are very modest: \$15 to \$30 per month (paid in pesos) even for adults with advanced degrees, such as physicians. Those who have access to dollars (from families in the U.S. or from tourism income) appear to have enough to purchase up-to-date household goods and small Asian cars. Most autos on the streets, however, are 1950s American sedans kept running with Russian parts and Cuban ingenuity.
- 5) Freedom of expression is severely limited in Cuba. Banned is the right to publicly oppose government policies and regulations or the right to publish personal dissent through newsletters or media outlets. Prohibited is the right to organize an opposition political party or social coalitions not supervised by the Communist Party. On the other hand, personal conversations with Cubans about their society were not marred by fears of detection and an aura of freedom of expression existed within the churches. The evolution of citizen social responsibility and freedom of expression (called civil society) was slowed in 2003 when 75 Cuban activists were imprisoned. Cubans expressed that the activists' convictions were made certain when the Cuban government revealed evidence that the U.S. was allegedly provoking and funding the activists' activities.
- 6) Churches enjoy freedom of worship and assembly and churches participate substantially in social service and urban improvement programs. The government officially recognizes forty-four religious traditions, and several unregistered traditions also operate within the country. The relationship between churches and government has evolved from the initial popular enthusiasm (1959-60) to confrontation (1961-70), to co-existence (1970s and 80s), to rapprochement (1990s), and, hopefully, cooperation (2000 and beyond). Protestant pastors with whom we spoke stated that the Protestant churches fared better under Castro's first atheist and then secular society than they did during the Batista era accompanied by dominance by the Catholic Church. In 1959 when Cuban churches were distanced from sponsoring U.S. denominations, the Cuban Council of Churches benefited from relating more directly with global church groups such as the World Council of Churches. Speakers said that ecumenism in Cuba today lacks vision and energy, but found it promising that in March the Cuban Council of Churches elected a black, Pentecostal lay woman as President. Cuban theology has evolved to incorporate a rich blending of African spirituality, Spanish piety and mystery, and Protestant values. Cubans are a religious people and the pervasive religious tone is a gentle spontaneity, a practical, everyday comfort with things spiritual, and a delight in the marvelous and miraculous.
- 7) When the USSR began to withdraw its substantial support in 1989, Cuba descended into a severe economic depression called the "the Special Period" (1991-93). As a result of the 77% contraction in foreign trade, the Cuban economy declined 40%. The government encouraged foreign investments in order to extract oil and gas and to develop international tourism. To a limited extent, small businesses were allowed. From 1993 to 2003 food production increased 33% and tourism has increased 14% annually. Today Cuban oil and gas extraction provides 60% of domestic use. In 1993, in order to capture foreign currency, Cuba legalized the US dollar. This has resulted in two economies, a peso economy and a dollar economy, and has resulted in many Cubans working two or three jobs- one

which pays dollars (tourism) and one which pays in pesos. Speakers mentioned physicians who drive cabs or work in luxury hotels because of opportunities for greater income.

- 8) Although life continues to be challenging for the Cuban people, they generally seem happy, in good spirits, warm, fun loving, kind, and live with dignity. The streets are filled with residents walking, talking, laughing and going about their business. Poor economic incentives under the current two-currency system have discouraged some youth from pursuing post high school education or professional occupations, and some reportedly talk instead of emigrating to other countries. Otherwise, we found little pervading sense of sadness or bitterness, but rather patient expectation.
- 9) The 45-year old U.S. embargo has been a failure in terms of its stated goals. The embargo has neither caused the ouster of the Castro government nor has it brought about a more democratic form of government or a market economy. Instead it has hurt the Cuban people and increased their support for the Fidel government. The blockage has isolated our two nations from each other and the rest of the world through an ideological clash. The U.S. policy stands at odds with those of other nations, including Canada, Mexico and the European Union, and has deprived the U.S. of business investments estimated to be \$2 billion a year. The embargo has restricted the exchange of medical research, has curtailed U.S. tourism, and even bars educational visits to Cuba except through difficult to obtain treasury licenses. A majority of the U.S. Congress has expressed willingness to remove or substantially reduce the embargo. A middle ground exists that would involve working with our allies through a combined effort to promote democratic and economic reform in Cuba through a policy of engagement.
- 10) Cuba's future after Castro will depend on which of the current strains within the government, the dogmatic Marxists or the more pragmatic "Fidelists", come into leadership. Traditionally, the Marxist factions have held to their positions for ideological reasons, while the Fidelists have been slightly more open to progressive policies for a greater public good. Tension between these two factions has existed in the government since the revolution. Current US policy helps strengthen the Marxist voices by providing a constant threat in light of which the Marxists insist Cuba cannot afford to open up to political or economic reforms. Therefore US policy will continue to have a large effect on the evolution of Cuba's future. In sum, the future of Cuba will be shaped by Cuba's economic and cultural engagement with the global community and the degree to which Cuban youth adopt the revolutionary ideals that brought about Cuba's current achievements in art, science, social justice, and cultural vitality.