

## History of the UCC Cuba Study Seminar

In 1978 the Cuban Council of Churches invited the United Church of Christ, since it had no prior mission contact with Cuba, to send down a delegation to become better acquainted with the life and mission of the church there.

In 1979 the UCC sent down a nine-member delegation sponsored by the United Church Board for World Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries: three national executives, three Conference ministers, and three local ministers. The Reverend Ted Braun was fortunate to be one of those local pastors chosen.

The opportunity for a week to see firsthand all the new things that were happening in Cuba, the new system of values being lived-out, and the vibrant life of the church in the midst of it all, was a powerful and rewarding experience for all participants on that first delegation. When Reverend Ted Braun discovered that the UCC had no specific plans for continuing this new contact and relationship, he inaugurated, with the blessing and support of the United Church Board for Global Ministries, an annual UCC Cuba Study Seminar program that formally began in 1980.

The first UCC delegation to Cuba consisted of four people -- two men and two women. For transport they secured a Church World Service six-passenger plane and pilot to fly the group from St. Petersburg, Florida to Havana and back again. Within Cuba, the visit each year is sponsored by the Cuban Council of Churches, and the schedule and on-the-ground transportation is set-up by the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People (ICAP) according to the wishes of the delegation. The length of the UCC trips quickly expanded to two weeks, and included exploring the greater part of the country from Havana and Matanzas in the west over to Santiago on the eastern coast.

Over the forty years of annual visits, our groups have numbered from eight to twenty-six, for a total of over 500 participants. The groups have been ecumenical, not only from the UCC but from many different denominations and faith families, including Roman Catholic (the director of Pax Christi), and a Jewish professor. Trip members have been primarily from the U.S.,

but also from Canada, Australia, and South Africa -- people who had heard about the seminars. The trip has also had participants from the faculties of Eden Seminary, Lancaster Seminary, New York School of Theology, and Yale Divinity School.

Out of these contacts, two sister church relationships were established between two churches in Cuba and two UCC churches in the U.S.: the Church of the Good Shepherd in Carbondale, Illinois, with Ebenezer Baptist Church in Havana in 1984, and the Pleasant Hill Community Church in Tennessee, with Second Baptist Church in Santiago. Peace United Church of Christ in Greensboro, North Carolina has established a relationship with the Lavastida Christian Center in Santiago.

In 2023, the UCC Cuba Study Seminar will include visits to various churches, a Protestant seminary, the Latin American Medical School in Havana, an afternoon concert with the Cuban National Choir, a visit to the Che Guevara National Monument, conversations with government officials, a meeting with the Cuban Federation of Women, a tour of a local health clinic, and a party with a neighborhood association.

After his final trip to Cuba in 2013, Rev. Ted Braun passed the leadership of the Cuba Study Seminar over to Reverend Tom Warren and his wife Kim Miller who had been on Ted's trip in 2003 and spent a month in Cuba in the summer of 2009. This will be the 7<sup>th</sup> year that Tom and Kim have been organizers of the trip.

(Revised in March 2023)