



Presbyterian Ministry in Cuba

From November 8 through November 13, Pastor Caroline Unzaga and Skip Winter of the First Presbyterian Church of Cranford, joined seven other members of the Synod of the Northeast on a trip to Cuba. The main purpose of our trip was to reconnect with our Cuban Presbyterian Brothers and Sisters and engage in mutual conversation as to what ways we could reestablish a relationship that has really been dormant for many years. We visited eight different churches over the course of the six days and enjoyed overnight hospitality and food in many of them. One Synod covers the three Presbyteries and fifty-five churches and a Seminary. Basically, the history of the Cuban Presbyterian Church falls into four timeframes, which I would briefly like to comment on.

The Cuban Presbyterian Church was established in the early 1900's. Property was relatively easy to acquire and churches were relatively inexpensive to build. All of the churches we visited were over 100 years old, with many established as mission churches as the denomination began to grow. The inner city urban churches tended to be larger, with the mission churches being smaller. Schools also were established in the cities to accompany the growth of the churches. In 1959, there were approximately 500 Presbyterian pastors in Cuba; after 1959 the number shrunk to 12 with many accepting calls in the United States.

The takeover of Cuba by Fidel Castro in 1959 changed the face of the Presbyterian Church. Presbyterian pastors had supported the revolt by Castro against the Batista regime, in the hopes that the change of government would make things better. Unfortunately, that did not happen as in 1961, Castro nationalized all of the schools and made it more difficult for people to worship.

In 1968, the Presbyterian Church of Cuba and the United Presbyterian Church at the time, parted ways, not because of any major disagreements, but simply because the two churches had their own individual issues to work out each in their own way. The Synod of NJ, which had assisted in birthing the Cuban Church voted against the move. In 1989, 30 years after the revolution, Castro held a major televised event at which he invited the leaders of all churches to participate in, to make worship for all denominations more open.

Today, in 2018, while the Presbyterian Church in Cuba has stabilized, it faces many challenges. While the existing churches are vibrant and active, there are not enough pastors to serve every church. Some churches are led by Elders and one church we visited was being led by one very dedicated 26 year old congregant. Pastors in Cuba, as in the US, serve multiple roles as pastors, stated clerks and moderators. Many churches serve as hosts to visiting groups such as ours to facilitate cooperation and to also help themselves financially. The difficulty arises because of the inability of Presbyterian Church Leaders in Cuba to receive visas to exit the country and come to the United States to engage in mutual conversation and learning.

Skip Winter
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