

The beach at Varadero.
(This cross-cultural stuff is hard work!)

Day Seven: Writing after the weekend, we have experienced the extremes of Cuban society. Saturday we went to the beach city of Varadero. There is a thriving Presbyte-

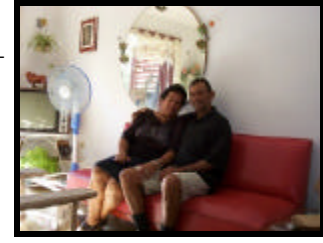
rian Church there that, in the midst of tourism, runs social programs for the entire country. They own a large beach house that they run as a retreat center during the cooler months, and as a summer camp for handicapped children during the hotter ones. Like many projects, they depend for success on Cuban ingenuity and foreign dollars. They have partnerships with both American and Canadian churches. The beach nearby is open to Cubans, but thrives on American dollars. Only those with resources can afford to go, not unlike many American beaches, but here that margin is much smaller. Only a few miles down the beach, however, are the tourist hotels where Cubans are not allowed. Even when relatives visit, Cubans are not allowed to stay in the hotels.



Alamar

Saturday night Richard and I went with Eduardo to Alamar, a suburb of Havana where Eduardo has established a group of house churches. Alamar was built after the revolution, and there are no church buildings in the entire area. Most of Alamar is made up of five-story, high-rise apartment buildings. Most of the apartments are two bedrooms with a balcony that reminded me of U.S. public housing. The family I stayed with was host of one of the house churches. The hus-

band and wife, Miguel and Engracia, were baptized by Eduardo—in the nearby ocean! Their apartment was clean but Spartan. Soon after we arrived, the electricity went off for an hour in the middle of dinner—typical, we were told. In the morning, there was no water for a shower—also typical. Welcome to the “Cuban reality.”



My hosts, Engracia & Miguel

The Sunday service consisted of songs, prayers, and Bible readings. We stayed at the first service for about a half hour. Then, with Eduardo, we made stops at five other house churches, offering greetings and prayers at each one. (After each stop, Eduardo summoned two or three men from the house church to accompany us to the car, in case his 1954 Pontiac wouldn't start and we needed a push!)



House Church In Worship



Eduardo with his car, a 1954 Pontiac, now equipped with a Mitsubishi boat motor (!), in a familiar pose.

Eduardo's effort, like many of the churches in Cuba, is supported by American donations, so his parishioners were happy to receive us. The groups have energy and warmth. They clearly see themselves as part of something that is growing and significant. Each house church has fifteen to twenty participants. Two years ago, Eduardo started from scratch. Now there are six. On the first Saturday of each month, they gather together in a larger house for worship and celebration of the Eucharist. (How they obtained the larger house, where they are building an addition in the back for their monthly worship, was unclear.)



House Church in Alamar

They also do more than worship, but are involved in improv-

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House Church outside Alamar, in a home without running water.

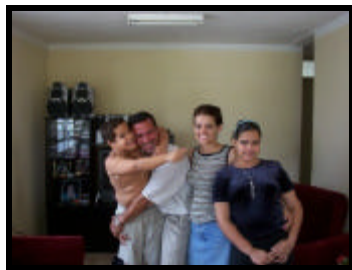
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ing community life, pooling resources to support one another, using Eduardo's resourcefulness and the dollars he raises to get

things done. Our final stop was in a very poor neighborhood of houses in an adjacent area, where the host family lived in a wooden shack without running water. Eduardo's goal is to get a pump and provide water to the entire neighborhood.

The status of pastor here is interesting and complex. It reminds me somewhat of the status of African American pastors before Civil Rights. On the one hand, it is very hard work, and all the students in our program are clearly committed to working within the "Cuban reality," and joining the struggle to improve life in Cuba in tangible ways. On the other hand, because of the support of U.S. churches, pastors are now part of the dollar economy. Eduardo, for example, lives in a very nice house—nicer than any of his parishioners—provided by U.S. support. It reminds me of the comment in Taylor Branch's history of the Civil Rights movement that when Martin Luther King came to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery he was the highest paid African American pastor in the state of Georgia. Moreover, while the churches

are still somewhat "suspect" by the Cuban government, they are just about the only independent institutions in Cuba



Eduardo with his family, in the nicest home we were in the whole trip.

Day Eight:

Another "red letter" day yesterday. Ruth and I spoke for almost an hour entirely in Spanish! There is a



Song leaders for morning chapel.

sense in which after a certain number of days, the language "clicks" and all of a sudden it comes from a deeper place within, with much less anguish. It is a very satisfying feeling. If only I had another month...

Our project over these several days has been to examine our ministries through cross-cultural encounter. One vehicle has been to reflect together on a case study provided by Carlos. Our case study has to do with a church wanting to add a so-called "contemporary" service, with the catch that the organizers want to leave out the sacraments, which they deem "out of place" in relation to contemporary "seekers." I explained to Ruth that in the U.S. the "worship wars" are often construed as having to choose between two poles, one that holds on to tradition in all its aspects, and the other that eschews everything traditional, including many of the richest symbols of the Bible. I commented that I have come to see the tension not between traditional and contemporary, but between participatory and passive. There is a way in which both traditional and contemporary "seeker sensitive" services can be spectator experiences. We agreed that the worship services each morning during our stay have been rich examples of communicating the deep symbols of the Bible in the language of the culture, in which the hunger of the age is met with the resources of the Biblical tradition. While our two contexts are quite different, to ask "for what do you hunger?" or "for what do you thirst?" works equally well in both settings. We found that

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

despite our different contexts, our challenge in ministry was the same: to understand both our contemporary culture and the Gospel well enough so that we can communicate a fresh word from the Gospel to meet the hunger of the people.

We have found that while this challenge is the same, our struggle with the relationships of the Gospel to the culture is quite different. In Cuba, in which for long years the Cuban culture, particularly in Protestant circles, has been considered alien to the Gospel, the project has been to discover points of convergence in which Cuban culture can be embraced and celebrated. In contrast, in the North American church, our culture has often been too easily embraced. Our challenge is to comprehend the gap between the message of the Gospel and the values of American culture.

In both our contexts, at the present moment, to be a Christian is to be a part of an alternative community that exists on the margins of the culture. Yet, as Ofelia has said, this does not mean that church must accept the role that the culture designates, either in the Cuban context, in which the government has said to the church, “you take care of things of the spirit and we will take care of things of the body,” or in a North American context in which the church is to concern itself with matters of private and personal spirituality. Ofelia teaches her students that the church must insert itself into the culture by taking its mandate from the Gospel, not from the government or the culture.



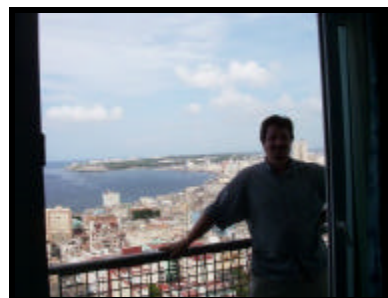
Carlos & Ophelia with stole presented by the seminary.

Day Nine:

In many ways, today's topic was the most complex and troubling. The presentation, on the church and civil society, was led by Dr. Adolfo Ham, a veteran leader of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba who has been active in international ecumenical circles and was an early supporter of the revolution. It is a nettlesome issue. In some ways, there is no "civil society" in Cuba, in that all the so-called "grass roots democracy" is ultimately controlled by the state. The church exists within this restricted environment and, for many years, the state's repression of the church effectively undermined the church's public presence. Recently, the church has gained a greater amount of freedom within this restricted arena, but nothing like what we take for granted in the states, and only to the extent that it does not abuse its freedom. The usual over-simplification is that the Roman Catholic Church is so anti-revolutionary that it has no voice, while the Protestant Ecumenical Council of Churches is so pro-government that it has nothing to say.

In debriefing Dr. Ham's presentation with Ruth, she said that—much like in the U.S.—there is an opinion gap between mainline church leaders and the people "in the pew." The members of her congregation—and, in general, most of the members of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba—are considerably less pro-government than church leaders such as Dr. Ham. On those rare occasions when the church has an opportunity to speak publicly, she wishes the leaders would project a greater distance between their views and those of the state. On the other hand, that is easier said than done. She knows of no Protestant church leaders who publicly supported the dissent movements. Of the seventy Cuban citizens who were arrested

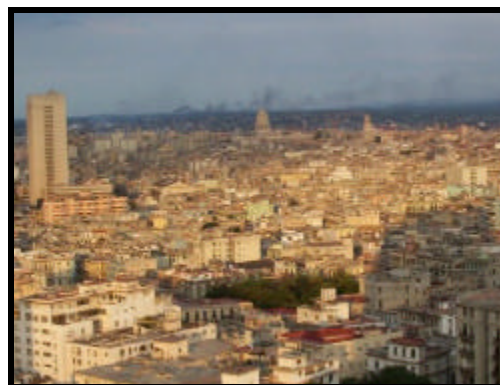
for "activities to subvert the revolution," not one was a church leader. Even organizing people at the local level for greater voice in the affairs of their community, such as community organizing, simply isn't done. Yet, even within this choked environment, the church plays a vital role. It is one of the few zones of freedom where people can, cautiously, speak about the reality of the lives—even if it is only with one another. Moreover, Cuban church leaders get a lot done behind the scenes because they have the government's ear. Second-guessing what Cuban church leaders should do, or what we would do in their circumstances, does not do justice to the complexity of the dynamic in which they find themselves. As Dr. Ham said at the beginning of his presentation, "After two weeks in Cuba, you will understand things less than you did when you arrived."



Overlooking Havana



Typical of the many posters we saw sporting revolutionary slogans. This one shows Cuban independence hero Jose Marti, with Castro in the back ground. There were few images of Castro alone.



The Capital

Religious Freedom in Cuba

Technically, there has always been separation of church and state in Cuba, and freedom of religion, even after the revolution. After the revolution, however, the church—particularly the Roman Catholic Church—was vilified for being counter-revolutionary and captive to “bourgeois” interests. To be a Christian was to be suspect. To practice your faith publicly was to risk your well being, even if it was technically legal. Moreover, many, many clergy left the country. The result is that the churches stagnated. Many churches closed their doors. At its low ebb, the seminary in Matanzas had only seven students.

In the early 1990’s much of this began to change, through a series of interrelated events. First came the collapse of the Soviet Union. To put it crassly, suddenly the government needed the churches to help in ways they had not before. Second, Castro made a well-publicized trip to Latin America, where he met several “Liberation Theologians,” who were combining Christian practice with elements of Marxist thought. Castro loudly complained that he wished he had Christians like these in Cuba! When he returned, several Protestant church leaders confronted him, saying we have been here all along but you have ignored us. This was the beginning of improving relations between the church and state.

A third facet was the visit in 1994 by Jesse Jackson. While he was there, Jackson met with church leaders, and worshiped with a group of Protestant Christians accompanied by Castro—the first time Castro had ever done so. After the service, Castro proclaimed before the national and international press, “You see, we have complete freedom of religion in Cuba.” The Protestant leaders took Jackson aside and said, “This is absolutely not true.” Jackson pressed Castro on the issue, and one result was a change in the constitution the next year that changed the Cuban state from officially “atheist” to “secular,” and that lifted the prohibition on Christians becoming members of the party. This was followed four years later by the visit from Pope John Paul II in 1998, and in 1999 was a large Protestant church rally at the same site where the Pope celebrated mass.



The Seminary Chapel



Looking out from an abandoned church overlooking Matanzas.

The result has been an explosion within the churches over the past ten years, particularly since 1995. Their crisis—a happy one—has been to provide enough capable leaders to pastor the growing number of church members. Christians in Cuba are still a minority, but they are a growing minority, with the largest number of church members never having been a part of the church before.