

**This is an account of First Presbyterian Church of Racine Wisconsin
Initial Relational Mission Trip to Cuba, March 21-28, 2015**

The group: Georgia Herrera, Jeffrey (Jeff) Leavell, Theodore (Theo) Leavell, Robert (Bob) Moore, Nancy Moore, Benjamin (Ben) Neal, Catherine Neal, Dennis Reeser, Julia Reeser, and Gillian Weighton.

Trip Preparations: This trip is only possible through the dedicated work of members of First Presbyterian Church Mission Committee and members of the congregation over the last two years. (Details to be added)

March 20, 2015: We arrived in Miami through separate flights on Friday. Several of us stayed at the Hyatt House near Miami Airport. Others were in locations nearby.

March 21, 2015: Those of us at the Hyatt House rose early for breakfast and caught the hotel Shuttle to the airport at 6:30am and caught up with the rest of our group as we entered the international concourse at 6:45am to start our check in process. Five process points later our checked baggage was taken and we worked our way to TSA at 8:10am. Some bottles of water were lost due to our over eagerness to self-supply but all made it through Miami TSA without major incident. Next we found our gate, resupplied with water and waited to board World Atlantic K85901. Once on board at 9:40 we waited on the tarmac waiting for space to taxi. It seemed forever but at 10:25 away into the sky we flew over the Florida Keys and in 45 minutes we were touching down in Havana (Habana) Cuba at 11:16 to the sound of applause. We would learn later that this is Hispanic custom for a safe flight. We departed ramp steps at into a sultry hot breezy day with gorgeous sun. Something so different than the weather we left behind.

We walked into a small terminal that was orange adobe in colored with bright blue trip and headed for a line, any line. A woman named Rosa caught up with us, greeted us and call out some of our group's names. We evidently stuck out. She was sure we were the Americans she was looking for in need of our visas. We were! She handed out each visa individually and sent us on to a line, telling us that we only needed the visa and our passport for the first point of entry. She would see us again. "I am here to help you." We waited our turn and were each asked a few questions, including how many passports we owned and if we recently had been to Africa. Then our picture was taken (without glasses) and buzzed through to the next area. We lined up to have our carryon luggage scanned and we talked through a metal detector. As we ventured to the next table there was Rosa to take our supplemental paperwork required by the Cuban government, leaving us with only our typical customs declaration paper. She directed us to find our luggage and to wait at the side until all our suitcases were found. Baggage claim was quick. Soon shed ushered us through the final customs checkpoint and out the door into the parking area of the city with many people, sights and sounds to absorb. At 12:13 she walked us over to Pastor Ary of Matanzas Central Presbyterian Church who welcomed us to Cuba and took us to a well decked out school bus which was praising the love of God and breaking barriers. Pastors for peace in an attempt to break the trade embargo brought goods through Mexico to Cuba, even this bus. We helped load our suitcases in the back with the help of our bus driver Manuel and then loaded the bus with Ary for our first look at this country. Our adventure was now truly beginning with a two hour ride to Matanzas.

The city streets of Havana were bright, colorful and noisy with a wide variety of vehicles, and buildings both colorful and in disrepair. It continued to be sultry, hazy, and hot with tropical scenery. We had so many questions to ask yet we also were trying to soak it all in with our eyes. The bus radio played a variety of music, most of which were recent pop tunes including Taylor Swift, Megan Trainor, Sam Cook and Pfarrell Williams. It was not what we were expecting. We traveled out of Havana and through many small towns along the coast and eventually inward, never being very far from the coast. Shortly before Matanzas we stopped by this large bridge expanse (longest and highest in Cuba) where there was a state respite stop with refreshments, paintings and souvenirs, and fresh pina coladas served in pineapple shells were bought by Ary since we had no time was given in the airport to exchange our money. You added your own rum to suit your taste. There were gorgeous views of the valley, a valley that was between us and the city of Matanzas. Shortly after crossing the bridge we traveled city streets until we arrived at the Seminario Evangelico de Teologia where we will stay. It is located approximately 8 blocks up the hill from the church.

We were greeted by Ary's wife Beidy who is the associate pastor of the same church. We were assigned our rooms. We were located on the third floor. They were set up with twin beds in each room. Two rooms were connected with a shared bath. After setting down our stuff we headed down to the first floor and then stood in the shadow of the courtyard to enjoy ham sandwiches, guava juice and cookies as a light lunch. They showed us the seminary grounds, the living water system where we could stock up with "safe" water and a grand view of the harbor at the basketball court where three large rivers meet and head into the bay. Breath taking views to say the least. We asked many questions including how safe the streets would be for wondering. The neighborhood near the seminary was safe and most places are safe in the daytime. The pastors left us to ourselves to rest but we wanted to survey this new country and ventured out on the streets. When we reached Central church we split up. Some ventured on and others of us walked back to the seminary to enjoy the cool breezes or take a short rest before traveling by bus down to dinner at the church.

At the appointed hour 6pm, we boarded the bus for the short drive to Central for dinner in the fellowship hall in the back of the church. We were served a wonderful meal of fresh vegetables; tomatoes, cabbage, and cucumbers, the second plate were plantain fritters, third place was black beans with rice, the fourth plate was pork and potatoes with the last plate containing yucca plant. Living water is located at the church as well. So pictures of water and guava juice grace the long table. For dessert we had a Russian Chocolate cake and Cuban coffee. We shared stories and learned more about the church. They have 79 members but 125 or more come to worship. Many young people come with friends and without their parents.

After dinner we went up to the sanctuary where we were greeted by many members. We had an informal gathering. Church member each introduced themselves and looked forward to the opening of new relationships with each government. They shared their gratitude for our presence and we couldn't be more thrilled to learn about them and become one in mission. We were entertained by many talented young musicians on the piano, flute, violin, and one 6 year old singing a Capella. At one point we broke into 4 groups according to our birthdays. I was in with those sharing January, February, and March birthdays. In fact First Presbyterian was present in all groups but October, November, December group. We introduced ourselves to each other and shared unique things of each's world. The January, February, March group then selected to hum and sing background of an Elvis hit played on the flute by a wonderful young woman who also

translated between us before the rest of the groups. Others shared their group's piece. It was an enjoyable time with prayer, singing and sharing. An elder of the church Kim (Korean heritage) shared the history of Matanzas. We provided the 175 years of First Presbyterian's History book along with post cards of the church and the church cookbook for Central to enjoy. It turns out the pastors met Ben and Karla when they worked together at that Cuban Camp Ben described to us years ago. The camp where he described cleaning beans and rice each day. The bus took us back to the seminary to sleep. The schedule for Sunday includes breakfast at the seminary before attending Sunday school and worship.

March 22, 2015: Ben and I were up at 7:00am and prepared for the new day. We wandered the grounds taking pictures before gathering at the Seminario for breakfast. We joined three Americans visiting the area as part of the living waters systems from their home state of New Jersey. Dave, Bill and Todd(?) were welcoming and gracious. They talked about their ties with The La Playa Church in Matanzas and gave tips and wisdom when considering creating a sister relationship from their experience of doing mission long term in Cuba. We were served sausages, bread, juice, milk and coffee. The sausages looked more like skinny hotdogs. After breakfast, we gathered to walk as a group downhill to Central church for Sunday bible study, worship and fellowship.

When we arrived there was spirited Adult Bible Study led by Kim in the fellowship hall and Children's Sunday School happening in upper areas of the church. They were creating something for the day. Pastor Ary was leading a new members group to the side area of the Sanctuary. At the appointed hour we gathered in the sanctuary for Sunday Worship, the last Lent Sunday before the celebration of Psalms. It was vibrant, loving and welcoming. A translator was arranged and sat with us, interpreting worship. This allowed Georgia and Theo to enjoy worship instead of working to allow us to know what was happening, although we were very grateful for their skill. We at one point were welcomed forward to introduce ourselves. Prayer was led for our church and our developing relationship. A church member with accounting skills gathered us up at one point to assist us with monetary exchange. Our funds would be brought back on Monday in the form of Cuban Cucs. Lunch was held in the fellowship hall with ropa vieja (shredded beef known as old clothes), beans, potatoes, plantain fritters, and fresh vegetables.

A short time later we traveled by bus to Monserrate Park (Parque) further up the hill of Matanzas with other church members. Here was a former Catholic Church that was rescued from disrepair and turned into a culture center. In fact it was on these grounds that Ary and Beidy wed. We enjoyed the view looking back at Matanzas and then looking down the other side in the valley we glimpsed from the state respite site on Saturday. We gathered at one end of the park and split into two groups. Ary took half of the Central and First Church members with him across the courtyard and Beidy stayed with the rest of us. We enjoyed sitting on the stone wall under the shade of trees. Each of us introduced ourselves and were encouraged to ask questions of each other. Many things were shared along with many cell phone pictures to explain our stories. After all our cell phones here are expensive mini cameras or alarm clocks. Cubans have cell phones but no internet and our systems do not work here. If they are lucky they have access to email. Beidy and Ary only have email access at the Seminario. We learned that there is limited internet at hotels, basically for business people or tourists and it is extremely slow. So it is probably good we have no access, it would just frustrate us.

We gathered back together after about an hour and sang some songs led by a church member musician who plays guitar. We then headed to the bus but there was a band playing music on the other side of the park and it drew us like a pied piper. Eventually our leaders corralled us back to the bus for our next stop at El Boro. We took a drive across town and up another hillside into the country. We turned onto a dirt road and headed into a poor settlement area. We stop at a gated memorial that marked this place as a Korean settlement sponsored by the Presbyterian church. At one time it was a very self-sufficient settlement. The Koreans moved on and other people settled the area that struggle with a subsistent life. Poverty, domestic violence and other problems are of life here. The church each Sunday sends a bus to pick up those who wish to attend church. It started out with the children of the area but now several adults also attend and have joined the church. They have committed to being more involved in this community. Everywhere we walked, people came out to see us and children followed along. They greeted the pastors and played games as we continued to learn about the area and looked at how people live. We were invited in one man's home whom we had met in worship earlier in the day. He proudly showed his farm animals contained in his small yard. There were plantain, banana, and coconut trees along with other trees bearing fruits that I could not name.

On our way back into town we traveled by their baseball stadium. It was quite large and is obviously cherished by the community. It was named for the Victoria de Gion (Victory at the Bay of Pigs). The team presently is leading the country in tournament play (like our world series). Their mascot is the Crocodile. Everyone has baseball fever and are very proud. As we returned to church the baseball team bus drove by and Beidy cheered. Just like in any family Ary's heart is for the Industriales, Havana's team which is no longer in the playoffs. The pastors both love their country and have shared openly their hopes and fears with the changing government relationships. We headed up to the roof top over the kitchen area of the church to have conversation and share dinner in the beautiful weather. Some of the men ventured across the street to a bodega to buy beer (servesa) to share. We were served Mahi Mahi, potatoes, rice, lime, green beans, beats and carrots. As always there was dessert and Cuban coffee. This time flan. Water is always available since the church also has it's own living waters system. Our meal was interrupted by a short rain fall. But we regrouped and enjoyed good conversation about the pastors' hopes and dreams with Central church enjoying that great flan. They shared their dreams and the possible relationship wanted with us. These are the bullet points of our continued conversation.

- Relationship understanding in their eyes means creating a long term relationship
- Ary has experienced several partnerships in previous churches and wants a shared mission that is people to people with personal connections.
- Supplies are nice but not necessary
- This church believes in supporting the elderly and low income in their community
- They have access to email and not internet
- They would like visits once or twice a year. It is very hard for them to get visas to come our way.
- There has been a long term relationship with Highland church in LA but Highland has never visited, just sent money
- Monteca CA group visited and expressed an interest.
- The Outreach Foundation has an interest, Melanie Boast of the PCUSA
- A church in Athens GA also has an interest in the congregation

- Before Ary and Beidy, Central was declining and the scope of missions was limited without staff.
- Programs they would like includes adult and children choirs. They would like to pay for a choir director. They would like to expand education tutorial, study programs. The church has four missions in eastern providences which requires long travel to reach. One is a small congregation of Korean decent that is 12 hours one way by bus to visit.
- They want to do more with the El Boro community.
- The church needs an administrator but it has been hard to place in the budget.
- The Seniors' breakfast only happens because of the women of the church. They would like to expand it to more days a week if there was funding available.
- Their wish list over the next six months includes setting a diaconal regional center at the farm that is now been entrusted to them to serve. (We will see the farm tomorrow) It will involve local education for farmers in the region, learning more organic methods while also providing a mission and retreat focus blending a working farm with a theological understanding. They wish to work on grants to support this new ministry. Their church also does not have enough space for education and they want to renovate the facilities. Their big dream is to cre3ate a nursing home for the elderly. The Cuban population is aging rapidly and they feel it is their duty to support them in very substantial ways. The church has been asked to support a local children's baseball league. There is the possibility of youth volunteering in Cuba with a German church.
- Partnership can travel in many different directions. Time and resources are important but we must establish relationship that brings us into one family of faith. They see priorities as follows; commitment, time, relationship strengthened with prayer, resources, and finally money. They do not want to focus on money. They want mutual exchange as we continue to work for the future.

We noted so many similarities between First and Central. Transformation was a buzz word for both congregations. Both are in times of transition.

After very fruitful conversation we then took a nighttime walk down into the center of the city and into the city square. It was dark and beautiful. We were able to connect earlier conversations of Matanza's history to the actual buildings. We stepped into the lobby of one hotel, one of only two in all of Matanzas. Very old, beautiful and ornate. A gentleman had a computer open and was on the net. We had not been able to follow the Badger's basketball since Miami. It points to such differences in connection and the need for face to face meetings. They want to share mission and ideas that does not happen if we only send goods, services or money. Ary and Beidy walked us back to the seminary through the dark warm streets. We could hear African drumming and chanting in the night air. It is probably the worship of Santeria. Some of us met some students in the study lounge and talked for a few minutes before heading off to rest up for the next day. The schedule will be packed for Monday. We will start by busing to the beach, return for lunch and off to the farm that has become a new mission for Central. We are also scheduled for visitations and stops for completing the evening in prayer houses. We are warned it will be a long day!

March 23, 2015: We rose and ate breakfast at the seminario with our new New Jersey friends again. They informed us that the seminario never had flags for their flag pole or for ceremonies.

These men had the flags custom made and now it flies out near the view of the bay. It is a great gift. We learned that local women were selling hand crafted needlework and crafts in the lounge and went over to take a look. Some of us came back with gifts. We then boarded the bus, picked up the pastors and traveled to Varadero Beach an isthmus that has ocean on one side and a large bay on the other. It is a beautiful area and reminds me of beach resorts anywhere. It has all-inclusive resorts and lots of beach area to share. We stopped first to see the local Presbyterian church before heading to the shore. The sand was silky soft white sand that felt like velvet. It felt so good in my bare feet. The water was a gorgeous blue without much evidence of the ocean. It was so clear and like swimming in a very large salty pool. There were just a few boats, some motor and some sail. Most boats are seen along rivers and not allowed to move out to sea. It is a strange sight for someone used to boats anytime or anywhere. The government doesn't allow this. A man from Argentina snapped our group picture along the ocean before most of us popped into the beautiful sea while others jogged or ventured into little shops nearby. It was truly a gift of relaxation and refreshment. It was about a 40 minute ride from Matanzas and yet worlds away from the typical life of a Cuban.

We traveled back to the church for an "American Lunch" of plantain chips, two kinds of salad, and burgers with buns. Some utilized the showers to wash off the salt then we walked down past the square to the river bank where we saw young people kayaking in the water while others fished. Soldiers were gathering nearby enjoying the day and the shops of local artisans opened out into the space along the river. This is where we are heading, to see the works of famous artists such a Manuel. His workshop and gallery also was home to two other artists. We could see finished works and works in progress. Another group in the shop was also from the states. One artist working on his piece was wearing a tee shirt with a local Wisconsin town advertised on it, small world. As we looked around, some from our group traveled to a local bank to exchange funds. They had tried earlier near the church but the first bank had ran out of currency for the day. Something we Americans are just not used to. We then traveled on to another shop where they create their own books (note or journal). From there we boarded the bus waiting across the street. So far today the weather is much warmer and many of us are showing colorful remnants of the sun on our faces, noses, arms and upper backs. Maybe we needed more sunscreen but after such cool weather back home we were loving it.

We traveled up the far hillside to visit the Deaconate Ecological Farm owned by several generations of Carlos' family who reached out for help bringing a theological focus and support. Together scientists and seminarians researched and discussed better ways to do effective and ecologically sound farming practices. Oth..(name), now retired president of the Seminario oversaw the project from the religious end. The site now has space for retreats, work camps and provides education to local farmers on better practices for their own farms. They specialize in planting fruit trees and providing grazing opportunities for their 35 head of dairy cows (milked only once a day), turkeys, and chickens. They are also expanding a vegetable garden behind the family home for community needs. They sell 60% of the milk to the government to feed children and the other 40% is theirs to sell for a profit. Each children in Cuban has a milk allotment, many times it will be in powdered form. There is not pasteurized milk in Cuba. Each person buys milk and brings it home to boil themselves for drinking, cooking, and yogurt or cheese making. Carlos dreams of expansion and is working on fresh cheese to sell. Since the seminary president has

retired she has asked Central Church to take on the project as part of their mission. Quite an honor!

We each received a gift of the farm, a snail shell. They are a sign of great soil and what had been very limited in sightings under the trees for many years but now are showing in large numbers due to the change in practices. Their methods are proving very effective. Carlos and his family prepared a wonderful snack to enjoy. We had guavas, fresh yogurt, chocolate milk, guava juice, dulce liche, ham spread for bread and fresh cheese with fruit sauce (known as los blues). After snacking on this great food we toured the farm, saw the animals, the broken soviet tractor and fruit trees. We took some fresh fruit called Cherimoya for use back at the church and boarded the bus for home and dinner. While none of us were really hungry we politely ate what had been prepared, chicken, two salads, and flavored rice. Did I mention we usually had cake for dessert at every meal and this time it was coconut cake.

We then split into three groups and went to separate prayer houses. Congregation members hold a devotional time of sharing the word, prayers, praises and singing. We were at Marguarita Kim's house with congregation members and local neighbors. There were around 17 people which included Dennis, Julia, Ben, Ary and myself. Ary translated for us. Dennis has earned the nickname of Dennis the menace. You will have to ask him for more details. After the meeting we shared in a fresh fruit cocktail and Cuban coffee before heading for home. Several members walked with us until we reached their homes. Dennis was helped by a sweet lady until we dropped her at her house. Then we walked back to the seminary to rest. We are expected at the church at 7am when we will prepare a pancake breakfast for a senior group that meets regularly for Bible study and breakfast. All the people have opened their hearts to us. In turn so have we to them. We need to pack before bed, Tomorrow we will travel to Havana in the afternoon to the other scheduled church.

March 24: We rose early and walked down to the church. Once a week Central offers a Bible Study and provide breakfast for elderly citizens, many are not members. It is usually on Saturdays and the women alternate as leaders. They rearranged the schedule due to our visiting and asked us in emails to think about providing supplies for pancakes and syrup as our part. Ben had found a mix that only required water and brought a jug of Wisconsin Maple Syrup to enjoy. Our men whipped up the batter and cooked the pancakes. I sliced dinner rolls and placed a piece of ham in each. Julia worked on coffee. Others helped in different ways and many served our guests after the study was completed. It was an honor and privilege to serve them and we were given the opportunity to introduce ourselves and answer their many questions about our country. They were just as welcoming and gracious as all the people we have met so far. After they left we sat down to our own breakfast of the same food and enjoyed fellowship together. It will be hard to leave.

After breakfast we broke into two groups. Those wishing to paint bunk beds headed for the back room and those wanting to do crafting with women of the church headed to the next level where sewing and jewelry projects awaited. Most of our group chose painting and at one point I saw Dennis working on some electrical work. I helped sew an Easter banner of felt in preparation for services in two Sundays from now. When the craft group finished, as is their custom they gathered together, shared joys and concerns and closed in prayer. Then it was downstairs for

lunch. It seems like that is all we do is eat. We were served fresh vegetables, plantains, rice and beans and port. It was Jeff's birthday so they had a cake made (Russian Chocolate) which he served to us after we all sang Happy Birthday. A card has been passed throughout the church for signatures and it had many names on it.

Then it was time to sit with the pastors and hold a verbal evaluation of the trip and our experiences. Then with heavy hearts it was time to collect our luggage and travel on to Havana with our bus driver. We made one rest stop on our way, a different place with concessions and rest rooms. It was located close to the coastline and we were able to enjoy wildlife (possibly an egret or heron) and domestic life (Mama cat with kittens) as we walked around and stretched our legs. We drove to the Havana church where we have sleeping accommodations and some meals while we research the second church for possible relationship. The church we will stay at is Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada En Cuba which is pastored by Rev. Yoelkis Sierra Gonzalez. The church we will visit is La Fernanda with pastor Jose Paden. Pastors from both churches along with the administrator of this church and a session elder Nancy from La Fernanda who would serve as translator greeted us in the sanctuary and gave us the lay of the land. Single people would be housed in the two rooms off the kitchen that contain two sets of bunk beds with a shared bath. Julia and Gillian in one room, Dennis and Theo in the other. The three couples had accommodations in the pastor's home which is across the street. They were very gracious hosts. This church has a nice small footprint and has a place for a garden, chickens and ability to park their school bus off the street. They also have a living water system.

We were to rest before dinner after our introduction to the schedule and hot tea but instead some freshened up, others bought beer at the corner bodega and slowly all of us gathered with in the pastor's living room for conversation and storytelling. Then shortly before dinner, here comes another chocolate cake with a type of boiled icing which reminded us of marshmallows. The birthday boy decided that dessert should come before dinner so we enjoyed the yummy confection before heading up to the fellowship hall for dinner. Of course we enjoyed the usual good staples of Cuba. Fresh carrots, cabbage, tomatoes and cucumbers, rice, beans, yucca, and port. For another dessert we had fresh chopped fruit. Water, fruit flavored tea and Cuban coffee rounded out the delightful meal.

After dinner we hopped on the bus for a night tour of Havana. We saw a power plant that controls power for half the city, There were many beautiful buildings and they look so different at night. We drove by many government buildings and entered a city square where St. Martin is immortalized in statue and tower. Also Che Guevara and Carmilo Cienfuegos faces are immortalized on two buildings. It is quite impressive. These are two of the biggest heroes of the revolution. We are the only people wondering this square and after viewing this sight we venture on to the Northern Coast of Havana with its stone wall where young people gather. It is sort of a famous lover's lane. Then ahead we saw Jeff's dream location to celebrate his birthday. We heading onto the grounds of the Hotel Nacional. Old world excellence and opulence. It is spectacular. Started in 1910 it has at least two Spanish Cannons aimed at the bay. We locate a spot on the grounds outside and ordered Mojitos. We were enjoying nice conversation when a band arrived and played Happy Birthday and another song of Jeff's choice for his birthday celebration. After which rain started coming down bringing our relaxation on the grounds to a close. We wandered into the lobby area and looked at the sights. They even had a cigar bar

named after Winston Churchill. It was quite beautiful. Then we boarded the bus and headed home for the night. Tomorrow we will begin getting to know the La Fenanda church in earnest. Tonight we rest. It is safe to say we are all pretty tired.

March 25, 2015: Wednesday morning we rose around 7:30 am for an 8:30 breakfast. We were served a fried egg but not as normally seen in the USA. It looked more scrambled but not mixed with milk. The church has its own chickens for their eggs and a rooster. For some in our group roosters and sleep did not go hand in hand. Eggs can be considered a luxury. There was papaya, bread, milk, fresh yogurt, juice, Cuban coffee and apple tea. After breakfast we boarded the bus for La Fenanda. Nancy rode with us. The church where we are staying was her father's church at one time and her daughter lives near here.

On our way to the new church building we drove past the old one, just a couple blocks down the street. When we arrived we were greeted by the pastor which everyone calls Paden, wife Diana, and the session. They gave us information on their church, the old church building that they hope to convert into a pastor's house with accommodations for mission workers. They have many neighborhood children and have started choirs with them. The church cooks and feeds seniors at least once or twice a week and want to expand to four times a week. They have plans for two open classrooms on their roof with canopy style roofs for sun and rain protection. As they continued to share their dreams, the pastor received a phone call from no other than the same New Jersey living waters men who are in the area and want to evaluate their water system for a possible installation. What a pleasant surprise. They are invited to come right out and join us for lunch. The seniors started arriving and soon the other guests have arrived.

It is time for lunch and we were invited to be at the head of the line since we were their guests. We enjoyed pork, rice and beans, potatoes, pineapple, tomatoes, cucumbers, bottled water, Cuban coffee, and coconut for dessert. We then were divided into groups and were led to congregation members homes for conversation. Ben and I visited a home about four houses behind the old church. The mother, her daughter, her son, along with others share this small four room home. Three generations in close quarters. We shared much of our stories and asked questions. Her son arrived and was very passionate and happy to see Americans and he asked many questions too. We asked to take their pictures and they also took ours. They have great hope for openness between our countries. Nancy had accompanied us and translated our conversations.

We walked back to church where a 4pm Bible study will be held. This is where we were asked to speak about our church, its history, programs, mission, ministries, and its people. We presented the 175 year history book, post cards, and cook book. Then both Paden and Gillian spoke to the scripture read for study. They each gave their own interpretations. I, to my surprise was called forward to lead in prayer. Then the floor was open for more questions. Some of us brought our supplies today. I explained the medicines and vitamins to the pastor's wife and nurse member of the congregation. They eyed the yarns I brought and one lady took a skein of red yarn home. Red is a hard color to get. The supplies were locked in the resource room.

We then took a bus ride to Hemingway's home that is nearby but the grounds are closed for the night. We are told that Hemingway would climb his writing tower and watch Havana across the

bay. We understand that the home is just a small cottage in comparison and his boat is also there on the property. Young boys are playing baseball on the grounds, coached by a man who serves as a tour guide during the day when the grounds are open. Their coach walked over and talked to us through the fence. He learned that we were from the state of Wisconsin and talked for a few minutes until he had to get back involved in the ball play. We headed back to the bus and stood around talking for a few minutes when the coach ran over and talked again with us. He volunteered to lead our group through the grounds tomorrow and said he would waive his fee and would utilize Nancy to translate. Everywhere we go, people are happy to see us and want us to continue coming back. We then traveled back to the church for dinner.

There was lobster meat in red sauce, chicken, mashed potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, pasta salad, pineapple, and guava. For desert we had more coconut pudding along with cheese. They also treated us to red wine to go with the bottled water. We then boarded the bus for Forteleza (which means fort) to see the 9pm cannon fire. This Spanish Fort has kept this tradition from the days when the fort was manned by the Spaniards (1492-1900's). It is quite an impressive procession which has been done since the time of Spanish Occupation. The enactors were in traditional costume and the cannon was very loud. We were within 30 feet. Once the country opens up we will not be able to be so close. We dropped our hosts and took a long ride back home.

March 26, 2015: Today we had another wonderful breakfast at 8:30 and then on the bus back to La Fernanda. We arrived, picked up some of the church members and headed for Hemingway's home in the outskirts of Havana called Finca Vigia. This time the gate was open and we paid to view the grounds and peer through doors and windows of his grand home. The baseball coach met us and gave us a wonderful tour. We were able to walk up the stairs of the tower and see his swimming pool area and his boat Pillar in dry dock on the property. The is as he left. No one is allowed inside so it can be conserved. The vast amount of books and trophy heads of animals he hunted take your breath away. From his writing tower he could see across the valley and the bay of Havana. Many of our group agree that Ben looks like Hemingway. The coach wanted to stress that his time with the young baseball players is his way of honoring Hemingway. While wondering the grounds we met up with some lawyers from Springfield area that represent South American countries and want to get a head start with the Cuban arena. It is a small world.

We then loaded the bus and rode back to church. At church we picked up our picnic food, supplies and chairs along with the pastor and other people. We traveled out to Lenin Parque (Park). Fidel's secretary asked for an expansive park outside the city to give people a place to enjoy. It has the nick name "the Lungs of Havana" and I can see why. We found a good picnic spot under the shade of trees, private but near bathrooms. Out came the centerpiece of the picnic, a small whole pit roasted pig. They decorated him with a straw hat and a cigar. Then banana leave containers of rice and beans, fresh vegetables with vinaigrette, and yucca rounded out the meal. Lots of cold water was available to wash it down. After eating some played Frisbee or took walks. Most enjoyed the shade of the trees and the companionship. We then loaded the bus again and traveled further in the park and ended up at an amusement park. While I am not into rides others did take in some of the rides to the delight of Pastor Paden. The group got split up as some went off to find a cold soda. After a long wait they returned and we headed off to a mission they

support. Once a week on Thursday they travel to this house 20-30 minutes away to do bible study, preach, sing and pray together. After worship this day they fed us cake, soda, and water. These congregation members, many my elders insisting and making sure I was cared for. I am not sure if it was my red face or silver hair. They insisted that I use the banyo (bathroom) before boarding the bus and moved someone else out of the way for that to happen. We then traveled to Nancy's home to see a retired mission worker who was the first woman graduate from Matanzas Seminario. This 88 year old woman was charming and gave \$30,000.00 to La Fernanda to build the new church building. She did not hesitate to give her opinions and hope. I was given the opportunity to lead in prayer and praised God for this child of God. She told me to love all my patients in my mission work. Then we traveled back to the church to have dinner. Young people provided us with the Cuban gift magnets that they had made.

Our original driver has a commitment back in Matanzas seminario so Tony from the other church where we are staying will be driving us in their bus for the rest of our journey here. Tony drove us home and then we all unwound on the sidewalk and street of the pastor's house. This is custom throughout neighborhoods everywhere. Cigars, beer, wine, water, coke, etc were enjoyed along with much good conversation. The pastor and his wife are expecting their first child. Eventually we all head to bed, tired and with thoughts of enjoying old Havana as tourists tomorrow.

March 27, 2015: Again we were up at 7am for 8:30 breakfast. We then picked up Nancy and Paden. Just us, the pastor of La Fernanda and our translator. Just after passing a John Calvin Square which John Calvin's statue, the bus parked and we then shared our evaluation of the trip. We shared by joys and butts. After some frank conversation the bus dropped us in old Havana. Paden with Nancy to translate explained the culture allowing us to shop along our way. Items such as cigars, rum, panama hats, linen shirts, sculpture and posters were bought. There was a beautiful Catholic church in one of the squares. We visited the tobacco museum and saw humidors and other equipment used to make or smoke those famous cigars. There were 16 different labels shown of the most popular brands. We were enjoying the sights and sounds of Old Havana. The buildings are in good repair and very attractive to the tourist in all of us. Paden went out to do some errands and to exchange some currency for us while we wandered on. We visited the oldest university in the area. The building had been redone but they saved the original door and had a scale model of the original building. It was one of the few areas where we enjoyed air conditioning. We next went to a local brewery and sat outside under umbrellas to block the hot sun. We orders a 3 liter bong of dark beer. It provided enough for all twelve of us to have at least one drink.

Originally Paden was scheduled for a church/presbytery business trip but he cancelled because of his wife becoming ill. She was seeing her doctor and he remained with us checking on her by phone. He now rejoined us. We walked through more buildings and squares and eventually came to a café. Here we enjoyed many different types of coffee, many were mixed with rum (ron). Everywhere we went Ben was called Hemingway and two street artists drew him and looked for payment. Of course he paid! I think he enjoyed all the attention. Next it was the rum museum spelled "Ron" in Spanish. The store connected to the museum is the Havana Club brand. This is the small place Connan O'Brian had so much fun at as he also learned rum's history and how rum is processed. We were able to step up to the bar for a sample of the 7 year rum. We learned

that the year listed is the youngest age of rum in the mix. As good Presbyterians we all headed to the store to buy and take some good rum home. Next we walked to the large souvenir building where most people bought items to take home. This is a place where you can barter and hopefully work to get a good deal.

Again to the bus for a trip to Hemingway's favorite fishing village for lunch at a privately owned restaurant. The village is Cohimga (spelling?). It was very late in the afternoon and the place was air conditioned. Everyone ordered different dishes that were quite large and wonderfully prepared. We sat around the table enjoying great conversation. We finished our lunch around 7pm and drove back to our sleeping church for a late supper of homemade soup, salad, and fruit. We packed and those of us staying in the pastor's house decided to stay up and out on the sidewalk again to unwind and relax Cuban style. The pastor's wife's parents were visiting and joined with us sharing stories, asking questions, and sharing laughter together. After a couple of hours the dust picked up, rain was coming and it was time to move the furniture and head for bed.

March 27, 2015: 4:30am came early. Coffee, tea, and buns were available for a light bite to eat before heading to the airport. For some of us the 45 minute flight will not provide much rest. Tony our driver stayed with us until they allowed us to enter the terminal. This is Cuba's way of crowd control. We gained our boarding passes, checked our bags, paid the airport tax, walked through government check through and again had our pictures taken. Then we were allowed through the doors to the single concourse to wait for our flight. We are all a little punchy and with only one minor incident of authorities questioning Nancy's tube containing posters we soon were boarding our plane back to Miami and our own separate ways home. Little did we know that some had a few more questions to answer on the other end of the flight.