

*Soulful Citizenship: No One Stands Alone*  
Isaiah 58:6-12

I think you know, perhaps, that I just spent a week in Cuba. I was there with our Bishop, to hear and see the Methodist Church of Cuba, which has really done some amazing work in the past several years. We visited one church that has 183 small group leaders. We experienced worship that was vibrant and alive, and most of all: joyful. We heard about how small groups of neighbors, organized through the church, are changing people's lives by praying for healing, sharing their things, giving them hope. As the Bishop hoped when he proposed this trip, we saw a lot of things that might enliven churches here, in the California-Nevada Conference. I'll tell you more about those things in the coming weeks and months, no doubt. But today I want to give you the bigger picture of what I saw in Cuba.

With all that we've heard over the past year about opening the relationship between Cuba and the US, many of us, I think, have heard more about Cuba than we ever had before. But I didn't know much about the history of that country. So in case you didn't either, here's the briefest—and no doubt overly-simple—course on it. Cuba was settled by the Spanish in about 1492, about the same time explorers landed on the east coast of America. The island was a colony of Spain until the late 1800's, when the Spanish-American War put Cuba in the hands of the United States. From then on, the US operated Cuba as a sort of protectorate; a country that had its own constitution and president, but the US could change the laws or replace the president to suit its own interests. Cubans refer to the period of US rule as the “second colonialism”.

And honestly, I think it's not a proud chapter in US history. Cuba became a sort of playground for activities that the US didn't want on its shores: gambling, prostitution, liquor sales during Prohibition. The Mafia sort of terrorized the island, in collaboration with US backed dictators. The last dictator in that period, Fulgencio Batista, ran a repressive and corrupt government for many years.

And so in the late 1950's, rebellion, and then a revolution, grew among the people in Cuba. Che Guevara and Fidel Castro were the charismatic leaders of this revolution that overthrew Batista. In 1959 Castro assumed power, took back all properties that had been held by the United States, and began to convert Cuba into a one-party communist system. At the time, the world was divided up in a Cold War. The revolution put Cuba firmly in the camp of the Soviet Union. Now, when people there talk about the countries that have been Cuba's friends—Russia, China, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Angola—it sounds like the exact opposite of the countries we think of as allies of the United States.

In the first years after the revolution, opposition to the government was completely shut down. Private property was confiscated. Religious leaders, homosexual people, anyone who seemed like a threat, were sent to prison camps. Churches were tolerated, but all the property they held other than their sanctuaries was confiscated. They were barred from building new churches or starting new ministry sites. Every adult went to work, all in jobs and businesses run by the

government, which owned every business, every store, every restaurant. Public gatherings, except for those sponsored by the government, were banned.

In 1961, the U.S. began its embargo on all economic activity in Cuba, with the hope of forcing a change of regime. It didn't work.

So here's what the country looks like now. Many of the tight restrictions have loosened some, but it is as though time and economic progress stopped for the country in 1959. Havana is full of buildings built by the Spanish and Americans, with beautiful and ornate architecture, but those buildings are crumbling. They have never been maintained or renovated by the government; and because it's a communist system, there is no economic incentive—or ability—for people to invest privately. Anything built *after* the revolution looks like what you'd imagine in the Soviet Union: big, cheap, ugly. The streets are a mess, full of potholes and dangerous sidewalks. Many people live without running water. Cubans are paid about 20 pesos a month for full-time work, which is more than it sounds like, but still not very much. I saw some pretty dramatic poverty. There are few police visible, but when I asked about it I was told that the police are everywhere, dressed in plain clothes, watching everything; that the regular people are always looking over their shoulders. People own their own homes, but if they rent out space to others for extra income, they pay heavy taxes, and they are required to report on the activities of their renters.

And yet...there are many good things about a non-capitalist system. I saw no homeless people. Older people in Cuba are housed and taken care of. There is good health care, available to everyone. Free and good education, through high school and for many, even at the university. When I asked about unemployment, I was told that there is a job for everyone who is willing to work [for the government].

Communism is a tightly controlled, but paternalistic system; everyone is taken care of, at least minimally. I can see why some people believe that communism is closer to the way Jesus talked, and the ways the early Christian church lived, than the American capitalist system. Everyone gets what they need, rather than what they earn. Everyone contributes to the common good because the State requires it, enforces it. No homelessness, because the government provides housing for everyone. No involuntary unemployment, because the government puts everyone to work. Very little crime, because everyone is afraid of the police. In fact, I saw little disparity in wealth; almost everyone is equally poor. And despite the fact that Cuba too has a history of slavery, we saw almost no signs of racism; people of different races mix freely, work and live together gently.

For people who live in obedience to the system there is little to fear...but there is also little to hope for. Overall, it seemed that there is a sort of grimness to life in Cuba. And yet everywhere there are signs of resilience, a sort of stubborn creativity, an irrepressible joy. Just like you've heard, Havana is full of old, classic cars. Many of them are taxis; they cruise around the city with four or six people inside of them all the time. They're beautiful, fun. But think about it: they're 60-year-old cars. So they're constantly breaking down; you see them often with the hood open, someone tinkering with the engine. The exhaust from the cars is terrible. Cuban music plays loudly; it leaks out of buildings and onto the street. There is little Internet access; but the

government has recently opened up a few internet “corridors” on busy streets or in parks, so people congregate there, all with their phones in their hands.

People have figured out ways to get around the government’s restrictions, how to feel free even in a society in which resistance is prohibited. The Cuban Methodist Church has been particularly successful at this. In 1978, there had not been a Methodist clergy person ordained in Cuba in ten years. In 2000, the church was on its way to death. There were 3,000 members—total—in the Cuban Methodist Church. Today there are more than 47,000 members. Fifteen new churches have opened in the last year. Not in new church buildings—because building new churches is prohibited—but in houses that the people build and then *turn into* churches (they proudly told us). We heard about one church that just a few weeks ago tried a worship service on the street in Havana—which is against the law, of course. Hundreds of people gathered, drawn in by the music. When the police came and asked what they were doing, the pastor pointed to the Cuban flag and said, “We are praying for Cuba.” The police walked away.

Tourists go to the Buena Vista Social Club to experience Cuban culture; we did too. But on almost every night of the week, Methodist churches hold worship services that deliberately look and feel like part of the same culture. The churches are packed full of people, of all ages. They worship, preach, read scripture, dance and sing at the top of their lungs. No matter who walks in—people from every race and background, educated or not, poor or dirt poor—they pray over one another for blessings and healing. In big churches, we saw people lined up in the aisles, standing at the back of the sanctuary, even standing on the steps outside, waiting to get in. We saw small churches like this one, where people have brought old broken down bus seats and cheap lawn furniture into their backyards to create a sanctuary for their neighbors.

On New Year’s Eve, we attended a watch night service—much like the one our African Fellowship hosts here in our chapel—that lasted over four hours. Every church hosts such a service; every service is full of old people, young people, families. At midnight everyone was invited to throw into the bonfire a piece of paper with a note about something from 2015 that they were done with, ready to start anew. As someone said to us later, being at church is the most rebellious thing you can do in Cuba; it’s an act of resistance to things as they are. It is an expression of hope.

Among the group I was with, we talked a lot about how the Christian church thrives in times and places of persecution; in settings where you can’t trust the government to act in the people’s best interest; when hope sets communities and people apart from life as it is when you just go along.

This need for the Church to be a counter-cultural force can happen in any political system; I don’t think God has a preferred form of government. And I don’t think the Christians we met in Cuba were inclined to say that it’s the repression of Communism that they have reacted against or has made their success. What has made the difference in their church, they say, is allowing the Spirit of God to move freely among them; that their work has been removing the obstacles *inside* the church—old ways that before had kept that Spirit tamped down, boxed into a predictable place and shape. They talked a lot about prayer and fasting, to discipline their attention to God. They have taken the promises of God seriously; I heard one man—the pastor

of a church that started in his living room and has grown to fill his backyard—say, “I have learned that when we lift one hand, God lifts two hands.”

And so I come back wondering what would happen if we too took seriously God’s promises that come to us and to our church...

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.*

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

May it be so for us.