

Two Bags for Our Cuban Journey

Brought two bags for our Cuban journey.

One was full and the other was empty.

The one that was full had so much packed in,
an open heart to listen and receive everything within.

To empty out this bag was ultimately God's will,
so there would be two empty bags to fill.

And, they are overflowing.

Each day the contents of these bags kept growing and growing
from the love of our Cuban sisters and brothers,
the resilience and courage in unexpected spaces,
by seeing the mirror of our reflections in each other's faces,
the wisdom and solidarity with one another.

From breaking down perceptions and misconceptions so we can truly see each other.

From witnessing the beauty of God's creation in the oceans and hillsides, lush greenery.

From the food prepared served alongside a generous serving of love and care.

Tears shed, connections made.

Brought two bags for my Cuban Journey. One was full and one was empty... to empty the bag was God's will, so I would have two empty bags to fill.

Sheila Spencer

Convicted

When I set out on this pilgrimage, I was not entirely sure what to expect. I was just hoping God would show me something. And as always, God never fails. My life has been touched and changed by Cuba and its people. Prior to our pilgrimage, all I really knew about Cuba was what I heard on TV. I hadn't heard a lot about it recently but, historically, back in the days of Fidel Castro, it seems like I was always hearing something negative. Our media typically gave the impression that Castro was a tyrant and that the people were helpless, uneducated, and oppressed by a corrupt regime. What I learned, saw, and experienced was completely different. I was happy to learn that the people were well educated with their basic needs addressed. In fact, I found myself convicted for the way I had previously viewed Cuba and its people. I had to ask for forgiveness.

Audrey Jones

First Taste of Cuba

November 30, 2019

Words cannot adequately describe the emotion I am feeling right now....thankful, grateful, and blessed beyond comprehension.

Terri Rainge

We had an early arrival to the airport only to be held up for hours. This was a real test of our patience and our witness. I think most of us passed. And what a blessing to have Pastor Janae, Elder Myron Richardson and Minetta Richardson at the airport to support us and pray with us. Truly prayer changes things. The main thing is we all arrived safely. Having lunch at the Cuban Council of Churches was another blessing: chicken, pork, yucca, beans, rice, green beans, guava tarts, pineapple, papaya and guava juice. Thoroughly enjoyed touring the city, seeing the people, and the colorful classic cars that I had heard so much about. Our hotel was a former convent, nothing fancy but I liked the open concept. The biggest challenge was no WiFi in the room, only in the hotel lobby, and limited. That took some getting used to.

Re'Nita O'Bannon

Planning, organizing, and participating in the 2019 Light Of the World Cuba Pilgrimage was certainly a life changing event and one that will forever be remembered as part of my spiritual process. We were excited to finally meet face to face those who we have learned about and spent time understanding some aspects of their life in Cuba. Upon arriving to Havana, everyone noticed the beautiful scenery, palm trees, and bright sunshine. We were escorted on a large coach bus chaperoned by a friendly Cuban who provided a wealth of history and knowledge about the Cuban culture in past times. The people we encountered were friendly and a bit curious as they knew we were visitors. Listening to Cuban music and Spanish language, tasting the variety of Cuban foods, and being introduced to yucca along with other desserts was enlightening.

Raemina Neal

Together in Worship

December 1, 2019

Light of the World Christin Church delegates could not imagine nor visualize the hope, love, and the pride we would see and experience in Cuba, a country just forty two minutes from Miami. We spent a spirit filled day of worship and fellowship with the Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana and The Iglesia Episcopal members on the first Sunday of Advent.

Winna Diane Cargile

Sunday worship was at the First Presbyterian Church in Havana in one of the oldest congregations in the country. We were privileged to have met their first female pastor. I enjoyed hearing their African choir of medical students who blessed us in song.

Raemina Neal

Looked forward to having breakfast and was surprised to see it consisted of fruit, cold cuts, cheese, white buns, juice, and coffee. Limited choices for a vegetarian but that is often my situation at home as well, so I drank my juice and grabbed one of my protein bars and was good to go. Riding the bus to the Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada de la Habana gave us the opportunity to see more of the city. Like a kid in a candy store, I was trying to see and capture it all.

We met the pastor, their first female pastor, just like at Light of The World. Rev. Liudmila Hernandez Retureta graciously welcomed us. I felt right at home from the start, even with a service in Spanish. Worshipping God is a universal language. I loved seeing and experiencing the diversity in the church...the locals, a choir of African medical students, visitors from other parts of the world, and us. There was congregational singing in Spanish, our choir sang Let's Just Praise the Lord in English and Spanish and I thought this was a glimpse of heaven right here on earth. I loved this quote at the end of service, following the preaching of Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, "Worship is over. Service has begun!" The church cat found me after service and lap cuddled with me. Doesn't get much better than this! We ended our day with an evening concert at the Episcopal Church. I will have to admit that I did not believe there would be a sizeable crowd of people for an 8pm Sunday service. Wow! Did they prove me wrong! It was a wonderful night of music.

Re'Nita O'Bannon

History and Community

December 2, 2019

Today, we visited the Cuban Council of Churches headquarters and listened to a Cuban theologian who discussed history of religion in Cuba during the time of Castro. During our bus travels, I looked with amazement that I have been given the opportunity to visit Cuba, yet also saddened by an embargo that has affected the people here.

Raemina Neal

I was impressed by learning about the Cuban Council of Churches, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center, and other organizations, as well as how the government of Cuba actually operates. I was overwhelmed with the genuine concern for the people of Cuba by the people of Cuba. I sensed a true love for man and country.

Audrey Jones

"From the moment I saw our proposed itinerary, I knew I wanted to offer evening reflections on this day. Monday was our day at the MLK Center visiting with and supporting the work of the women and elderly in the community. I have so much love and respect for our Golden Lights (in and out of LWCC); I knew there was a connection with the seniors but I didn't know the full extent until a few weeks before we left. My family knew I was making the pilgrimage to Cuba but I do not think they really believed it until I shared my travel details. My dad provided me with a history lesson connecting the Rainge family to Cuba on a much deeper level. I had no idea that his dad was a laborer on the banana boat. In his early to mid 20's, my grandfather, RB Rainge, sailed the approximate 840 miles between Pensacola, Florida to Havana, Cuba loading and unloading bananas in order to support his family in the States. So almost 90 years later and an additional 700 or so miles, here I am ...standing on Cuban soil. To God be the glory for the things He has done!"

Terri Rainge

On Monday morning, our bus arrived at an edifice that had aged gracefully depicting the elegance of former years. This was the Cuban Council of Churches Headquarters. We were warmly greeted by the President and the General Secretary of the Cuban Council of Churches. We learned about the history of Cuba and the church in Cuba. They described the struggles of the Pentecostal Church and the Disciples of Christ Church in Cuba. They woke up one morning being Pentecostal and no longer a Disciples of Christ. But, here we were 100 years later in Cuba celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Pentecostal movement in Cuba. To God be the Glory!

It reminded me of a sermon Pastor Janae Pitts-Murdock delivered titled "Living with What's Left". You know the story of Esau in Genesis 27:30 – 35. Just like Esau, the Cuban people were not despondent because of the blows they had received. The testimonies of the church leaders clearly indicated that the Christian Church had survived and was full of love and hope for the future.

LWCC pilgrims were humbled and appreciated that a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center existed in Cuba. It was amazing to realize that Afro-Cubans shared and identified with the struggle for freedom, economic, and social justice experienced by African Americans. The Center was created in 1987 as an initiative of the Ebenezer Baptist Church and has had a tremendous impact on the community of faith, according to a staff of the Center who was also a pastor of a Quaker Church.

In the 1950's, many in the faith community felt that God had left Cuba. Between 45-50 % of the pastors fled Cuba relocating in the United States. Through the work of the Cuban Council of Churches and its partners nationally and internationally, the people kept the faith and worked with what was left. The Council along with the MLK Center support causes including women rights, children causes, handicapped, and elderly. We were blessed to walk to the Center where elderly women exhibited and sold their artwork. The pride illuminated in their presentations was heartfelt. LWCC pilgrims wanted to take home a token of the spirit those women possessed. They had used sewing materials, crochet yarn, and whatever materials they had to make something pretty and worthwhile.

That is what we learned too. When you feel lost, rejected, defeated, or hopeless, the one God who unites us all, can make something pretty, worthwhile, and useful from what is left from our weary souls. Our God provides hope for another way to bless you. We were truly blessed to play forward the message that was shared; return to our communities to serve our children, women, handicapped, elderly, and those in need.

Winna Diane Cargile

Different sights as we made our way to the Cuban Council of Churches. We learned so much church history on our visit, including the fact that it was the 100th anniversary of the Pentecostal movement in Cuba and that the church was founded by 4 women. On to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center where we met a female pastor of a Quaker church and learned about their focused programs: social theological, public education, communication and solidarity. At the end of the day, we met in the hotel lobby and shared some reflections. We were asked to think of one word to describe our experience in Cuba so far. Some of the words were: family, privilege, love, connected, grateful, fascinated,

perception, reconnect, heavy, honored, caring, blessed, humbled, convicted, transformation. It was a very impactful day!

Re'Nita O'Bannon

Moved to Tears

December 3, 2020

We visited a small Pentecostal church and they were excited about hearing an African American Gospel Choir. That was hard for me to get my mind around. I honestly did not think it was a big deal, and made me realize I was taking things for granted. God whispered to stop overlooking your blessings. The service was fantastic! I do not have words to truly describe and do it justice. The fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit fell down like rain. Language did not matter. We were strangers in the flesh but one in spirit. The Spirit just took over. We got a glimpse of what it was like at Pentecost. No way will I ever forget this experience. It will fuel my soul for the rest of my days!

Audrey Jones

Loved touring La Habana and Old Havana but the worship experience at the Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal can only be described in one word—WOW!!!! Even though we entered one of the smallest churches most of us had ever entered, it's also the place with a huge presence of the Holy Spirit. It was obvious they loved God and loved us. I felt right at home with my brothers and sisters in Christ even with the language differences. Every believer speaks praise! This was probably the most impactful day for me. I was moved to tears. Lunch followed at a beautiful outdoor restaurant on a hill with a magnificent view. If only we could have brought the entire church with us. We had a delicious lunch at Restaurant Don David. We then toured Old Havana and had another great meal at Mojito Restaurant where our group even became part of the live entertainment. What fun!

Re'Nita O'Bannon

We enjoyed most visiting with the Pentecostal Church of Cuba at a small church in the town of Caimito where the service was mighty. There were fellowship, hugs, songs of praise and new relationships were formed. Although the space was very small, everyone was determined to fit and find a place to sit or stand. I'm sure the neighbors in the community could hear the singing and music instruments around in the area and wondered who these visitors were. I learned the role of the church there was also to help the social needs of the community as well both husband and wife serve as team pastors. The neighborhood church is a pillar to that community by helping with community needs of families.

Raemina Neal

Called to Break Down Walls

December 4, 2019

Rev. April Johnson's reflection on the bus blessed me. She said all of us are called. God uses us to break down the walls that divide us. I felt as though that is exactly what this pilgrimage did for us, especially for all the negative things we in the United States hear about Cuba. Now we understand better. On to

Bacunayagua Bridge in Santa Cruz. What a spectacular view! And boy did we take pictures! We traveled to the Seminario Evangelico De Teologia in Matanzas with another amazing view. There's so much beauty on the island. We heard an interesting presentation about the seminary that has an enrollment of 56% women. The evening concert at the seminary turned into a major praise party! It cannot even be described in words. It was one of those "you had to be there" events.

Re'Nita O'Bannon

We visited the Seminary in Matanzas which is set in an environment of peace and tranquillity - impacting and educating leaders in ministry. The Voces de la Luz, Voices of the Light, sang at the seminary Chapel and Christ was glorified. We worshipped in music and marched with our feet. The once empty bags are overflowing. Our empty bags are overflowing and continually growing.

Today I sat in a gazebo at the Seminary that I visited twenty years ago and prayed with a group of women. God whispered this and other words to me. The bags are still overflowing and, when we get back, they are waiting to be unpacked. However, we must give ourselves grace and space as we unpack each piece, hold it close to your heart, and let the lessons flow. Today and everyday, we have seen, heard, tasted, touched, and felt the love of Christ in Cuba. Bags are still overflowing and growing.

Sheila Spencer

A Place of Beauty

December 5, 2019

We enjoyed a visit to the beach in Varadero, where I saw many seashells and gazed at a few nearby seagulls, one which landed for a while and turned into a National Geographic moment for a few vacationers. This particular ocean or body of water was clean and crystal blue and the beach. A place like I have never seen.

Raemina Neal

Ahhhhh! We had a brief shopping trip and then off to the hotel by the beach—Melia Varadero. The pilgrims had found our happy place...LOL! We enjoyed delicious food, entertainment, WiFi cards available for purchase, and that beautiful beach. I even stumbled upon a Zumba class on the beach and the instructor loaned me a pair of tennis shoes. What hospitality! We thoroughly enjoyed our time there.

Re'Nita Bannon

Unity in Diversity and Purpose

December 6, 2019

We said goodbye to Varadero Beach and headed back to Havana. Marelis Turro, our sister who joined us from the Pentecostal church shared such a heartfelt thank you. She said as a Cuban she would never have the resources to stay in a beautiful resort. My heart was convicted. We take so much for granted.

We arrived back at the Cuban Council of Churches for lunch and a presentation by Rev. Tony Santana, the president of the Cuban Council of Churches. My takeaway: Unity in diversity!

And then we experienced something remarkable and unique – Muraleando Project in Havana. It is an unbelievable artist-created community that was once a trash dump. What an amazing place! We saw and purchased art, dined, danced, experienced the most passionate tour guide named Victor, and left there amazed at what determined people can do when they work together. The project is beyond amazing!

Re'Nita O'Bannon

At Muraleando Project, I got a completely different sense of community. I may have witnessed an authentic community for the first time, a community that once was crime-ridden, beaten down and dying rises from a trash heap. And, how it rose! It sprang up as a beautiful garden of art. The community got involved and took control of it. They eliminated crime in the area and brought back a pride everyone thought had left. The community is now giving back to the children, and those with special needs, youth, and young adults. Its volunteers are being blessed as well. It is not only creating art from the rubble, but people too are springing up as art. Talent is exploding. They are seeing the beauty in their crafts and in themselves. Hallelujah!

Audrey Jones

Another remarkable moment of artistry was visiting the community art building which was created from recycled materials or neighborhood trash. This center is something to behold along with meeting bright and talented artists. Cuban society is very artistic and talented!

Raemina Neal

Grateful and Challenged

December 7, 2019

I am so grateful to be part of this pilgrimage. We were called to serve, to be a light, not just at 4646 North Michigan Rd, Indiana or the United States, for that matter, but 'of the world'. This was evidence by the 31 of us 'being present' and stretching our faith and love of Jesus Christ by standing in solidarity with our Cuban sisters and brothers. We stood side by side, sharing multiple languages and cultures and worshipping together as one. We were ALL glorifying our Father in heaven!

Terri Rainge

Cuba is now in my soul. I cannot forget Cuba and its people. I cannot ignore the impact of the embargo that the United States government has imposed on Cuba for so many years. I have to speak against it to whomever would listen. I have shared about this experience and will continue to do so. I will pray for our Cuban brothers and sisters and for our government to lift the embargo, to open its eyes to see clearly that it is seriously crippling the people of Cuba. And, I hope to return soon.

Audrey Jones

The time had come for us to leave. Who wanted to leave beautiful, sunny Cuba? Not me, but all good things eventually come to an end. Ann Gray shared a lovely poetic reflection that captured our full experience. As we departed the bus, our tour guide teared up. That did me in. We all bonded on this beautiful pilgrimage. I was left with this question stirring in my spirit: What will I do with all that God has given me? I LOVE CUBA!

Re'Nita O'Bannon