

## Church Mission To Cuba Offers Emotional Aid

### The Rev. Tom Schacher makes first heart-changing trip East Hampton Star By Carissa Katz

(03/25/2010) "It is good, when you are on mission, to allow yourself to go beyond where you came from and what life was, to immerse yourself in where you are and what life is," the Rev. Tom Schacher of the East Hampton Presbyterian Church wrote on a blog during a recent church mission to Cuba.

Although members of his and other local Presbyterian churches have been going on missions to Cuba for nearly 20 years, this trip, from March 3 to March 13, was Mr. Schacher's first visit to the island. "Missions are always life-changing and heart-changing, and this was no exception," he said last week at his office in East Hampton.

Six people joined Mr. Schacher on the mission in Cuba, where the Presbytery of Long Island has a 20-year relationship with the Presbytery of Havana. Local church mission groups have established a partnership with the Presbyterian church in Guines, a small city in the countryside southeast of Havana.

"We don't go down to Guines and build something or paint a church," Mr. Schacher said. "We go to strengthen relations and build up connections between us and the church and the people in Guines."

The mission provides "not financial aid as much as emotional aid," said Barbara D'Andrea of Wainscott, who has been traveling to Cuba with the church since 1994 and coordinates the missions to Guines.

Her husband, Dennis, who describes himself as her assistant, has been traveling with her for about 10 years, but his first experience on the island goes back much further than that. From 1968 to '72 he was stationed at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, where he served as an acting chart master.

Last week he recalled how he had studied the detailed charts that included strategic locations for potential bombings on the island. "Now I'm meeting all these people 20 years later," he said, and he is thankful that "the cold war never became a hot war." At the time, the people of Cuba "were an abstraction on a chart," he said, "now they're human beings."

In the pastor's mind, that sort of realization is one of the most important parts of mission work.

Also on this month's trip were John White of the Presbyterian church in Bridgehampton, Rob Stuart, a retired Amagansett pastor, Ron Fleming of Amagansett, and Emily Hawsey of Smithtown.

During mission trips, people have attended weddings, baptisms, and funerals, as well as many of the church's anniversary celebrations, which are "in February, but it's a floating date because they do it when I'm there," Ms. D'Andrea said.

"The thing I feel most is, they trust us," she said. "When we were first going, people were very guarded. It took them many years to open up and share."

In returning again and again, she and those who join her show the people of Guines that their commitment is ongoing. And that's important because a single 10-day trip might not make much impact, but the cumulative effect of many return trips does.

"We provide a lifeline as things get tough in Cuba," Ms. D'Andrea said. For friends in Guines, it means a great deal "just knowing someone is praying for them and working for them."

In dire times, "the churches gave hope to people," Mr. Schacher said. Although the government frowned on churches after the Cuban Revolution, it did not close them. However, it did require that a church open its doors every Sunday. For a long time, he explained, that meant that lay people kept the church alive, even as congregations dwindled to just a dozen or so people.

When the economic crisis in Cuba deepened in the early 1990s, people began to return to the church. Now, close to 150 people attend services in Guines on Sundays.

"There wasn't much hope in Cuban society, in the government. People had no hope for change, no hope for their lives. If people are going to find hope, they're going to find it through the church," Mr. Schacher said.



They turn to the church for spiritual sustenance as well as material needs unmet elsewhere in Cuban society. When they cannot find work, for example, or medicine they look to the church. The local mission groups help to provide some of those things, taking medical supplies, medicine, computer equipment, and money to the Guines church.

"These are very practical things that you and I can get hold of very easily," Mr. Schacher said.

Mr. White, who lives in Sagaponack, has been going to Cuba with the mission groups since 1998. Ms. D'Andrea, he said, is the "heavy lifter" who handles all the logistical details of getting the group from New York to Havana. In terms of documentation, the group needs a license from the United States Department of the Treasury, a visa, and a special Cuban religious visa. The application process takes several months.

"We have to do everything long term," Ms. D'Andrea said. It can be difficult to get people to commit to joining the mission so far in advance. Plus, they pay for the trip out of their own pockets, which can be expensive.

Yet people continue to return, even as they sometimes feel frustrated by these obstacles. "We get to see old friends that we've now known for a long time, kids who've grown up and are now small-business people. There's a continuity after 15, 20 years of doing this, and you develop strong attachments that you just can't break, no matter how inconvenient it is. It's worth all the hassle."

Although it is even harder for their Cuban friends to travel here, last year, two ministers from the Guines church were able to visit the South Fork. Over the years a number of lay people have also visited with special permission.

Mr. Schacher hopes to organize a youth mission to Cuba in July. He has done missions in Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, and Moscow. "In all my travels around the world, I had not encountered a people of such warmth and hospitality and genuine love," he said of the people in Cuba.

He gave the Sunday sermon in Guines on March 7. After worship, he wrote, "I stood in the back and shook hands with some. I say some because most gave us kisses and hugs."