

Mission Report – Barbara D'Andrea

East Hampton Presbyterian Church – March 8, 2009

Do you know the Buffalo Springfield song – *There's Something Happening Here*? You could say that about this church. There is something happening here! Those of you who were here on that snowy Sunday in January, the one before Dennis and I left for Cuba, know there was something happening here. You commissioned us as missionaries. Pastor Tom called you to come forward if you would pledge to pray for us the twelve days we would be in Cuba. The last time he called you, at least two dozen came forward. That was so cool! But this year when he called, every person able to stand came forward and laid hands on me or the person touching the person touching me. I heard people later asking – *did you see?* There was something happening here. The grace of the Holy Spirit was among us and it felt good.

A group of nine representing Montauk, Amagansett, East Hampton, Bridgehampton and Shinnecock traveled to Guines on Monday. We would stay in the manse sharing it with the new minister and his family.

On Tuesday we went to the beach. On the way, we went through the bus driver's hometown. He stopped in front of his house, oblivious to the traffic behind him. He blew the horn and his plump, round-faced daughter, whose physique mirrored her dad's, jumped on the bus with kisses for her popi. In the meantime, a five gallon jerry jug of fuel was poured into the tank – a black market fill-up. Here's how the scam works, tractor drivers fuel up at a government facility. Then once around the corner, they siphon part off it.

Driving through the different towns, I was struck by how many people were idle on the streets. The ennui of lives having no futures was perhaps the saddest thing I saw. This is what causes many people to take overloaded boats to the Keys, the search for something that makes them feel alive.

Wednesday afternoon we drove to Havana to attend the consecration of La Fernanda Mission. She is the first new Cuban Presbyterian Church since the Revolution. It is a house church that began when mission was done underground. Then the government took an about-face policy towards churches and La Fernanda came out into the open. Today was a major event and representatives from every church in the Presbytery were there. The tiny church was packed. People spilled into the street. It was a joyous celebration highlighted by gospel and operatic solos. Towards the end, all the ministers were called into the sanctuary to be part of the consecration. Our group's five pastors crammed into the room, Steve Howarth towering above them all.

Thursday we participated in a project initiated by Guines' new pastor Yampier Sanchez. Each was assigned to one of the eight Session members and accompanied by an English speaker, visited different church members' homes. I went with retired pastor Ismael Madruga and his wife Isabel. The first person we visited was Rosa, a 92 year old lady. Rosa had recently become a church member. She wanted to commit herself to God before she died. She had gone to the church in her youth but had left when she married and then came the Revolution. She could only hear if you shouted into her cupped ear. Life is hard. She lives alone and is at the mercy of the

godless. She'd been burglarized and her few possessions stolen – her TV, a clock and a picture. Her deafness limited the conversation but she was delighted we visited. We continued on to visit Eulalia. Her broken hip has mended and she is beginning to move around with a walker. She stood to show us as soon as we entered. Her husband went out while we were there to pick up their bread ration. Upon returning he showed it to me with disgust. Two rolls were all his ration book allowed for the day. There is a real shortage of food for the elderly. Their humble home is one of the older wooden ones waiting to collapse in a hurricane. We chatted and said a prayer. As we were leaving, Eulalia promised the next time I saw her, it would be in church and she will have walked there. The groups meet later to share their experiences. We had witnessed the reality of the people's lives. Some were doing okay while others lived in poverty.

Friday afternoon, we did a Bible study with the congregation. They look at passages to see how they relate to today. The study was, *On the road to Emmaus. Did our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road?* Churches in Cuba were almost empty during the first thirty years of the Revolution. There has been a rebirth in response to the adversities faced by most Cubans. During the discussion, one person said, *before I came to church, I didn't know the love of God. Adding, I now look back and say, ah, He was always with me. Sometimes we see only dark around us but we know it will not always be that way.* It doesn't matter where we live; we have a common experience around the table.

A wet Saturday, we continued the home visits accompanied by the Deacons. The first home was located on the ground floor in the back alley of an apartment building. It was dark with a surreal feeling of Batman's Gotham City. Aida welcomed us into her small narrow sitting room. She is a timid soul who spoke of how she was afraid of life and that the church has helped her to open up. The congregation is her family and with their love, she is able to face her fears. When we arrived, Aida was visibly shaking and spoke in whispers with her eyes cast down. My traveling companion Mayela, a native Spanish speaker, has a way of sharing intimately with people and putting them at ease. When we left, Aida had a soft smile and tears in her eyes. By now the rain had gotten serious. My pants were soaked to mid-thigh. Parts of the walk were under porticos and the rain falling from the overhangs resembled strings of crystal beads. The drops bounced from the street like firecrackers. An occasional car would drive by sending up sheets of splash. A young girl ran by in mock rage when doused by the tidal wave of a passing car. We discussed the visits later. Yampier explained to us how important they were to the members. They felt greatly honored – something that was hard for us to grasp, none of us having fantasies of being rock-stars.

Havana's famous camel buses have moved to the country. Of course camels only go straight through town as their tandem bodies could never make the turns on the narrow streets. Most of the corner light poles already have gouged out sides, exactly at the height of heavy-trucks' mirrors. The town looks like giant beavers have worked their way around. Here's another example of the crazy Cuban system. Roads are not in the best shape. You might think you were in Beirut with some of the craters in them. The street running from one end of town to the other was being paved. Why? The national bicycle race was coming through. Narrow-wheel bicycles and potholes don't go together. The locals are expected to cope whereas star athletes are coddled.

Sunday was the 107th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Guines church. It's amazing that Ismael was its pastor for almost half of that time! They weren't easy years; so many of them were spent in the desert, an empty church with only a handful of followers. But God blessed his ministry and it is now a thriving church.

Nancy Howarth preached the sermon. The title was '*Moving On.*' Do you believe God has a sense of humor?! Nancy had not known there was a bit of difficulty in Guines' minister transition. The Holy Spirit put her where she needed to be. She spoke about setting out on a journey but not knowing the destination. If we had God's map, would we have the courage to follow it? Sometimes you don't realize you've been on a journey until you look back. It's a journey that is never over. We learn from the past and grow from it. We honor those whose shoulders we stand upon.

After the service there were hugs and kisses and not phony air kisses, but lipstick-cheek-branding kisses. They were kisses of goodbye as we had to leave. Ismael Gonzalez brought his grandchild to meet us. He said that he loved her more than life because every time he looked at her he could see his daughter. She had left for the states. He doesn't know if he will ever kiss her cheek again. The Cuban diaspora has torn families apart, leaving holes in many hearts.

There are more stories I could tell. But that is enough for now. Please continue to pray for our sisters and brothers. Amen.