

# Encouraged in Heart and United in Love in Cuba

by Joyce Rhead and Linda Matthews

On March 28, 2016, seven women from Atlantic Canada left home to meet up with Anne Drost from Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM) in Toronto, Ontario. Together, we travelled to Cuba with the purpose of building relationships with the women from churches belonging to the Fraternity of Cuban Baptist Churches. These relationships with Cuban women were built by sharing skills in handwork, as well as through prayer, worship services, and conversations between events. Our purpose was not one-sided; we didn't go to give or to do something to them or for them, but we went to share with them, and to be equal partners with them.

Our team was partnered with CBM who organized the travel arrangements and acted as a go-between for the group and the Fraternity of Cuban Baptist Churches, which was the organization that had invited the team to go to Cuba. Because CBM doesn't have a staff member based in Cuba, Anne accompanied our team to ensure a smooth trip. Anne has established a long-lasting mentorship program between Cuban and Canadian women who are pastors. She is presently partnered with one of the pastors of a local church, where we stayed in Matanzas, Cuba. CBM also supports many projects in Cuba, such as training in Christian education, leadership formation, communication strategy, and project management.

We had the unique opportunity to explore the campus of the *Seminario Evangélico de Teología* and to meet with students there. The seminary is representative of four different denominations. Because we were there the week after Easter, we got to sit in on a round-table



Many neighbourhoods in Cuba are not wealthy.



Members of the Short-term mission team  
and a Cuban friend

discussion with students about what Easter meant to each of them, and we heard how they celebrated in their own churches. Each of these students is a leader in their own church in different parts of Cuba.

We were blessed with a wonderful translator who works at the Kairós Center, and who is also a student at a Cuban seminary. She stayed with our team for the entire trip, which enabled us to build a lasting friendship with her, and helped us to communicate with the Cuban people.

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**Joyce:** *"Meeting the wonderful people of Cuba and seeing where the people live was an eye-opener. They were so loving and thoughtful, and my heart went out to them in their hope for the future for their families and their country. Prayer is a powerful weapon, and I want to be praying more for them, that they would be able to see a better future."*

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One aspect of Cuban life that was very outstanding to us was the involvement and roles of the women in the church. Fifty percent of pastors in churches affiliated with the Fraternity are women. They help lead in worship and prayer, as well as in children's and small group ministries. Their participation extends to the community at large, which is evident in the work we saw being done at the Kairós Center in downtown Matanzas. The particular group of women we met with meets weekly to make banners, clothes, accessories,

and other items to sell. They share knowledge, techniques for their projects, and good times together. One woman in the group has received several awards for her handwork that she learned to do while in this group.

The strength of the women in overcoming their circumstances is an amazing inspiration to us. One demonstration of this was an 88-year-old woman who travelled a great distance by public bus to attend an entrepreneurship workshop held at the camp where we stayed in Havana. Isabel wanted to start a business in crocheting, but didn't have a crochet hook. Therefore, she



**Marjorie and Isabel**

got some aluminum and made her own. It was our pleasure to share some crochet hooks and balls of yarn from supplies we had brought with us, to support her in achieving her goal. We will never forget the smile on her face.

A powerful aspect of the services and events we attended was the theme of unity. It was talked about, but, even more, it was demonstrated in the incredible welcome that was extended to our team, as well as was evidenced in the support between individuals and churches alike. This unity was extended to our team by involving us in many different services and events, such as in serving communion, preaching, and sharing music.

The unity theme continued to be demonstrated during an ecumenical service that involved many denominations as well as visitors from other countries. There was an "open-microphone" session during this service, where representatives from these churches had the opportunity to express what unity means to them. One of our team spoke on our behalf, with help from a translator.

Items which had been generously donated for distribution were divided equally between the Cuban churches. These items included SMILE (Simply Moving in Love Everywhere) dresses, which is a project in which women from different churches, communities, and provinces make dresses for girls in need of all ages. This was a special moment for Joyce, as the founder of the SMILE dress project on Prince Edward Island.

A special experience for Linda was the ability to connect with the Cuban people on a deeper level through using their own language, because she speaks Spanish. This helped facilitate equity between our group and the Cuban people, and she has fond memories of those friends and the conversations shared.

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*Linda: "Since I returned to the world of studying a few years back, my life had turned into a daily routine of work, study, eat, and repeat, with a break on Sunday for church. This experience reminded me that God's purpose for my life is so much more than the daily routine and trying to get ahead in the world, but is more about his people and the relationships that are fostered amongst brothers and sisters in Christ. I've never felt the love of God more in my life than from the people we encountered while in Cuba."*

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Our short-term mission team felt our trip to Cuba was very worthwhile, life-changing, and memorable. While in Cuba, we ended each event with reciprocal prayers, and, in the same spirit of unity and togetherness, we can continue to be in prayer for these amazing women in the future.



*"Our purpose was not one-sided; we didn't go to give or to do something to them or for them, but we went to share with them, and to be equal partners with them."*



*"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love . . ." (Col 2:2a).*