

*By Kristin Delaney, from Edgewater UMC*

I never would have thought going to a place like Cuba would change me in so many ways. The thought of going to a Communist country, where I had no idea what to expect, scared me so much. My expectations were completely wrong. As soon as we arrived in Cuba I could feel the love, from people who didn't even know me. Our days and nights were spent with so many incredible people with so many things to offer. Our first couple of days were spent at Camp Cannan, which was amazing. There was kids of all ages and it was nice just to be able to spend time with them and have fun with them. The second day we were at the camp, I became very ill and bed ridden. I have never seen the love of God so much through people before this day. They immediately had two doctors taking care of me and strangers coming to my door asking to pray for my healing. It opened my eyes so much, because who would have known that strangers could love you so much. People prayed for my healing and miraculously the next I was completely better. The power of God really revealed to me that day. The last night we were at the camp, we had a late night worship service, people were sobbing and worshipping the Lord like I had never seen before. Kids, my age, were falling to the ground worshipping and it was so touching and amazing to see. After everyone was pretty much in tears, all of a sudden the band sped up the music and everyone started dancing like crazy. These people could go from passion to joy in a split second and it was so inspiring.

The rest of the week we visited our sister churches. We went to multiple of church services and experienced the Cuban way of worship. When we met the pastors, their families and the congregations, they made us feel like family. Our sister churches were put together so well the services were filled with wonderful music and opened arms to us. God really shined through each place we went in Cuba. No matter where people stood in their life, they all treated us like family because that's what we are., brothers and sisters in Cuba. The people of Cuba Struggle each day, trying to support their families and yet they ALWAYS have a smile on their face and arms wide open, They showed me what the true meaning of love is and that I need to appreciate all that God has given me. Cuba taught me to love God and love others no matter the circumstances or what point in my life I am at. I not only came back from Cuba with an experience of a lifetime but I came back with a heart full of love for my Cuban brothers and sisters.

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*By Taylor Hunt, from Edgewater UMC*

The trip to Cuba was an amazing experience. This was the first time that I went to a country that speaks another language, being surrounded by people speaking Spanish made myself feel a little trapped in not knowing what could be happening around me without understanding the language, but I found in myself that I know a lot more Spanish than what I thought. Everything that we did on this trip was a different adventure that could not be explored in the United States.

Traveling on this trip changed me into understanding that there is a world outside of the United States though it may be different, people can still enjoy their life. What I brought back was the thankfulness for everything that I have and being closer to God. Being there I realized that no matter what, I can always talk to God and he will always be there for me. The Cuban people don't

worry they put all their trust in God, seeing this I realized the I don't need to worry and I need to give everything to God.

This trip was amazing and my favorite moment was seeing the different culture and way of life but also seeing that even in a different culture and society these people are not different to us in the end. Most people would not consider the Cuban society rich but I would, every church we visited and all the people we encountered were very rich in faith, they had a smile on their face and they were happy to be worshipping and learning about the Lord.

Going to Cuba and seeing the beautiful country was definitely a piece of God's amazing capabilities and within the scenery is where I saw God the most, knowing that God created such an amazing place for us to live this part of our life just because he loves us so much is wonderful. Thinking about how great our God is and for him blessing us with the world and its pieces of art and knowing who the artist is something extraordinary. Over all I would say this trip was a success. On this trip bonds, memories and character was made. I thank everyone for the opportunity that I could go on the Cuba trip.

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*By Ricky Lasso de la Vega, Edgewater UMC*

When I was first contacted to be able to go on a mission trip to the island of Cuba I knew that it would be unlike any environment I have ever been in before. I am familiar with the Hispanic culture from my trips to Panama and Costa Rica, but Cuba is still very different than those two countries.

We flew into Havana from Miami International and in the landing alone you could see a huge difference in the country. When we left Miami there were a large number of other planes all transporting people across the world. In Havana there was only one runway with one other plane at the airport. In the airport we got through customs without much trouble and we found Pastor Jose easily and we made our way to the dormitories. The next day we were able to tour around Havana and see the sights around the city. This was a highlight of the trip because we were able to see the city with life of the Cuban people. We also noticed the wear and tear the city has faced over the years as buildings looked beat down and paint chipping away. Even the capital building looked unmaintained with black streaks of chipped paint all along each side of the building.

After we left Havana we made our way over to Camp Cannan. The camp is in the middle of Cuba so that kids from either side of the country can come and meet.

The camp was a great highlight of the trip. At the camp we were able to walk around and talk to several kids attending the camp. The camp was designed to house 600 kids, but when we arrived it was housing 800. Yet with the 30% overpopulation the camp was still able to hold all of these kids under a roof and supply enough food for each mouth. In my view that is a feat only God could accomplish. The Bible says God will provide when needed and it was shown at the camp. Each night we were at the camp we were invited to the worship services with the students. We were seated in the front row and for three hours very loud and very high energy music that made every

student jump up and down praising the name of the Lord. I have never seen such passion and energy for the Christian faith in the United States, but in Cuba it is normal. Some of the group members and I attempted to join in on their dancing, but after ten minutes we lost all energy and could not keep up any more. The pastors who gave the message each night were also filled with the Holy Spirit. While I could not translate everything they said, you could immediately tell that the kids loved them and their words were inspiring. On the second day at the camp one of our students unfortunately became ill and was bedridden for the day. Later some students at the camp heard news of our sick comrades and asked one of our leaders if they could pray for her outside her room. This is a great example of how awesome the people of Cuba were. These students wanted to pray for a complete stranger. The people were fantastic everywhere we went.

After the camp we took a 10 hour drive to Mayari where we stayed at Pastor's Jose house. There we were able to visit our Boca Grande sister churches. We visited one of Edgewater's sister churches in Guahabo lead by Pastor Arjel where the church was very small, without a roof and was being supported by concrete support beams. Even though the church did not have a roof, the service was fantastic! The Church was on a large hill which had marvelous view in every direction. Up there you could see God's creation of the country. Later we went to Cueto where we visited Pastor Oliver's church. It was great to see him again from when he visited Edgewater when he came to the states. We were able to see him talk to his congregation after meeting him in Cuba.

The people at his church accepted us with open arms and it was wonderful to meet and talk to some of the people.

Once we came back to the states I realized how much the trip changed me. In Cuba the government suppresses the people but the government cannot suppress God. A great example is July 26. In Havana we saw several posters hung everywhere with the message Julio 26. Pastor Jose explained to us how that is the revolution day when Fidel Castro took his militia and overthrew the government. This is a day that while the government celebrates it, the people are not so happy to celebrate. Even though the government is more overbearing, the people are still extremely friendly. Everywhere we went (including the cities) the people were very kind. Even though the living conditions they are in are not the most comfortable, the people still treated us extremely well. Once we came back to the states I remembered their attitudes on life and now I try to live up to that standard each day. I am far more appreciative of the luxuries I have here in the states such as internet access, air conditioning, driving on organized roads, and even clean tap water. The Cuba mission trip will always be in my heart and the memories will never leave me. I pray that other future generations of students are able to partake in a mission trip away from the comforts of their day to day lives and visit these incredible people.

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*By Alexandra McKenzie, Boca Grande UMC*

Before going to Cuba, I already had many expectations of what it was going to be like because my mother had traveled there many times before. Often, she would come back with stories and photos which helped form my expectations of what a mission trip to Cuba would be like. But once I actually entered Cuba, all those expectations changed. Things I was told or warned about still

surprised me, like how freezing cold the shower water was or how people might faint during services. There were many other things that surprised me during the ten days I was there, but here are some of my favorites, the hi-lights of my trip.

One of the first hi-lights of my trip was arriving safely and quickly to Cuba. We were all expecting to have a very long time getting through customs, but something I'm very thankful for is that took us probably less than a half an hour to get into Pastor Jose's van and be on our way to the first church. Another thing that I was glad about was that we were getting air conditioning in our rooms!

Probably my biggest hi-light of the trip was Camp Cannan. Meeting the youth there and being able to interact with them and try to make conversation was really cool. Even though my Spanish is not the best everyone was able to communicate and have fun, many of them tried to make us dance with them too. Also watching kids our age worship so intensely was amazing. Seeing them worship so passionately that many people fainted was different than anything I have ever seen before.

Another hi-light has to be finally getting to meet some people my mom has talked about for so many years now. My mom's friends Yoli and Alexis drove an hour and half down to Mayari just to see us, and something I also was not expecting was getting to meet their son. Alejandro, whom I have been pen pals with from a very young age.

Also, visiting our sister churches and Edgewater's sister churches was fun. Getting the chance to give them all gifts and medical supplies felt rewarding. And attending services there to see how our sisier churches worshipped was awesome, although having to speak in front of people is not my favorite.

My last hi-light was definitely getting home safely with no major problems and being able to sleep in my own bed.

When asked what I saw or experienced that I knew only God could have done, I immediately think of the Cuba Methodist people as a whole. Even with the amount of poverty there, they are so resourceful and resilient. They are also passionate not only just during worship, but in everyday life also and that just really amazes me.

This trip to Cuba has changed me many ways. It has bought me closer to God but also has made me realize how materialistic we can be here in America. Going to Cuba and seeing how little they have, yet how much they do with really makes me think about what I really need in life, opposed to what I want.