

February 2009

Patio projects in Cuba

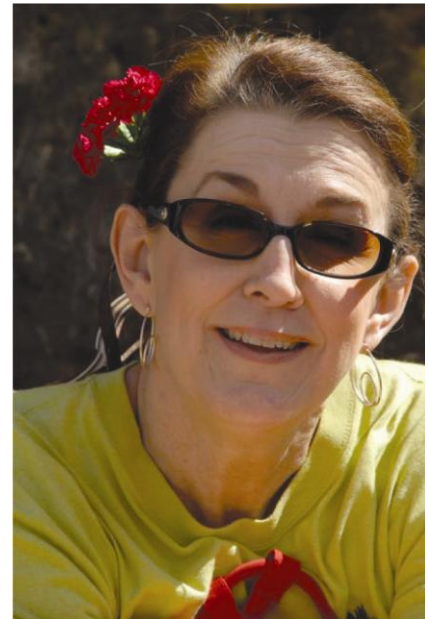
The importance of listening and learning

by Elaine Sarratt

Can listening and learning be as much of an act of worship and doing missions as pouring concrete, teaching an English class, hosting the homeless, or holding a medical clinic? It seems counterintuitive to most of us who are accustomed to going and doing, but in the case of our partnership with the Cuban Church of the Way in Guanajay, and its Patio Projects, it is most definitely an act of love, worship, and doing missions.

The Cuban people we met in Guanajay, San Antonio de los Baños, Pinar del Rio, and Havana were so happy that we had “come from far away” to learn about them, their way of life, their success in their struggles for survival, their devotion to the God who sustains them and gives them life, and perhaps, incidentally, their patio projects.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a new parent or grandparent, or have just completed some important project that you have worked very diligently on and were anxious to show to someone who would appreciate it. Then imagine that someone of great importance to you decided to visit you just to see your new “baby.” You don’t have the means to share your good news with them by going to see them, or even by emailing them pictures or sending them a message about it, but for some reason, they cared enough about you and what you are doing to take their time and use their money to come see you and find out all about it. Perhaps in this way, you can begin to understand how important our visit to the Patio Projects and the Church of the Way in tiny little Guanajay, Cuba, was to them.



Elaine Sarratt was a member of the team that went to Cuba between Christmas 2008 and New Year’s 2009. She offered these reflections during a presentation about the trip on Sunday, February 1, 2009.

During the early nineties, after the cold war ended and the Cubans no longer had gas, oil and food coming in from Russia, the people were so stressed for the basic necessities of life, that the mandate that all must be atheist was relaxed. House churches began to form, and theological teaching and training began to take place in seminaries. The pastor of the Church of the Way in Guanajay, with whom our church has a partnership, is Javier Perez, a young man in his thirties. Over the past 15 years, Javier has led their church, which meets either in the living room of his home, or in the garden of one of the church members, to develop what we call the Patio Projects, first begun with the assistance of the German program called "Bread for the World." One of the main tenets of these projects is that people use what resources and spaces they have, to raise fruit, vegetables, animals, and flowers, to share with each other and increasingly, with their communities at large.

While we were there, we visited many of these gardens and saw how they are using the support that we send them to do more than fill stomachs. Their participation in these projects has proven to be more of a human development tool. We were able to see both the resilience of the people and their land following the devastation of the recent hurricanes. We were all impressed with the seed garden that Candida had already developed where the hurricanes had blown away so many of her banana trees, which grow very slowly and had formerly been her main backyard crop.

In the city of Pinar del Rio, we became acquainted with the work of the Adonai church, by Jose, the pastor's son. This church began as a mission of the Iglesia Bautista del Camino, and even some of our Cuban hosts were amazed and thrilled to see all the progress and work that has been done by that church since they had last visited there.

We visited tiny patio gardens and large yard gardens and even saw a rooftop barn with pigs and chickens. We saw evidence of the sense of self-worth and inter-dependency that have developed as the people have worked together to provide for each other. In addition to seeing the resilience of the Cuban people and their land, I was struck by the ubiquitous nature of the Spirit of God. The presence of God in each person we met would have been hard to miss. It has not been quenched in this land where plenty is scarce. The Cuban people know a wealth in their poverty that most of us will never realize. At the home of

Julyan and Luisa in Havana, he left us with these words, which he spoke to us in his broken English, “without God, nothing; with God, everything.”

First Baptist Church, Greenville, SC | firstbaptistgreenville.com



This man fought with Che Guevara in Cuba. Sally Sarratt is at left, and Elaine Sarratt, right.



The First Baptist Church team that went to Cuba in December 2008 with some of the members of Church of the Way in Guanajay. The man standing with the blue baseball cap is the one who said, “Without God, nothing; with God, everything.”