

Cuban *Encontro*

Conference Statement by North American Participants

I. *Who We Are*

Cuba and the United States are so close together, yet so far apart. Separated by less than an hour's plane flight, we have, nevertheless, been cut off from one another for more than 25 years. In an attempt to break down walls separating our religious and national communities, a group of us responded to the invitation of our Christian sisters and brothers to dialogue at the Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. Our group was composed of theological educators who teach in seminaries across the United States in the areas of New Testament, Systematic Theology, Ethics, and Black, Feminist, and Latin American Liberation Theology. Our church affiliations were United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, Unitarian, Baptist, and Lutheran. We went to the Seminario Evangelico de Teologia in Matanzas, Cuba, to enter into an *encuentro* (encounter) with the professors and students of that seminary on "Theological Education in Global Perspective."

The *encuentro* included presentations and dialogue in Spanish and English between the two groups. This stimulated a great deal of self-critique about our own methods and perspectives on theological education. Even more, the possibility of sharing in the life of the Cuban churches and the Cuban society greatly enriched our own understanding of the global contexts of the so-called First, Second and Third Worlds and challenged our national assumptions and perspectives as U.S. citizens.

Our discussions led to a heightened realization of our commonalities and differences as church leaders and educators in the two very different contexts. In spite of each group's rather privileged position within our respective countries, we recognized that the Cuban and U.S. theologians must also contend with (rather different forms of) marginalization. In the U.S. we are marginalized and alienated from the dominant values and priorities of our society and government because of our commitment to liberation and justice. The Cuban Christians with whom we met are part of a small religious minority that seeks out ways to witness as full participants in their new society, which they appreciate and support.

We discussed our common agenda for prophetic and pastoral renewal

of the church and theological education in vastly different settings. Some of the concerns upon which we are working include:

- redefinition of the meaning of “the poor” when, as in Cuba, basic material needs are being met, or, as in the U.S., the assumption is that material needs of many can be met through charity, regarded as generosity.

- exploration of the methods and meaning of liberation theologies in contexts as different as the U.S., Latin America, Central America, and Cuba.

- building on the gains of women’s liberation in both societies, to develop a feminist theological perspective on the partnership of women and men in the church and society.

- recognizing our need for even more concerted work on crucial issues of scriptural hermeneutics, inclusive language, the relationships of religion and culture and of church and state.

That so small a group of Christians from only two countries, meeting on one small island, should speak of theological education in global context may seem presumptuous. Yet the form of this *encuentro* provided a good context for this topic precisely because of the socio-economic political extremes our two countries represent. We explored the entangled histories of our two radically different societies, so that each group could move through a process of self-critique in the light of the wider shared global realities. In our worship we remembered the martyrs of liberation struggles in Latin America, North America, and elsewhere in the world, and we lifted up our prayers and songs as participants in liturgies of Latin American peoples. Those of us from the U.S. are most grateful for the hospitality of the Seminary and our Cuban brothers and sisters. We want to share some of what we learned with people in the United States.

II. *What We Have Learned*

We came to Cuba with much “disinformation” about its political system and culture, the life of its people, and the place of religion in Cuban society. The more we saw, heard, and learned during our *encuentro* and through our church visits, the more profoundly troubled we became about the distortions—and often outright lies which the United States government has fostered about Cuban society since the 1959 triumph of the Revolution. We discovered a society whose people believe in the integrity of the government and affirm its continuous effort to build a new, just and decent society. We came away with increased outrage, particularly at the Reagan Administration’s twisting of facts about Cuba for the purpose of furthering U.S. economic and military interests in Central America and the Caribbean. Some of the distortions must be highlighted:

A. Religion

In the United States, we are told that religion is persecuted.

In Cuba, we met with ecumenical leaders, denominational heads, parish pastors and members of congregations. We learned from them that Churches, seminaries, and other religious bodies meet freely and appear to be lively. The Cuban Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and worship. We participated in eight different worship services in Havana and Matanzas, including the closing celebration of a period of reflection on the mission of the church in the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Havana. (This Mass and major address by the Archbishop was attended by some 1,000 worshippers.)

Many Christians are active participants in the revolution as they work for justice on the basis of a faith which enables and evokes love for all people.

There is a Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party which welcomes the participation of religious people in the work of the revolution.

Christians are not permitted to join the Communist Party, but Christian leaders indicated that their participation in municipal, provincial, and judicial processes is welcomed.

During the early and mid-sixties there were tensions, even hostility, between churches and government, and for a period in the mid-sixties some pastors were sent to labor camps. While there are still some tensions between certain segments of the Communist Party and certain Christian churches, these tensions have been reduced significantly over time. Those remaining are largely a result of dogmatic ideological postures on the part of *both* individual Christians and individual Communists; public policy aims at mutual respect. The fact is that Christian churches and other religious bodies, even those whose theologies are laden with counter-revolutionary implications, are not persecuted by the Cuban government.

Cuban cultural life involves *religious* materials: for example, we tuned into a Cuban National Chorus presentation on television while it was singing Negro Spirituals from the U.S.

B. Freedom

In the United States, we are told that there is no freedom in Cuba.

In Cuba, we met and spoke freely with people wherever we traveled. We learned that:

There are indeed restrictions on the press, on who can join the Communist Party, and on other sectors of public life which most directly affect the defense of Cuba in relation to U.S.-sponsored hostilities against the Cuban people.

Seditious acts against the state are dealt with as criminal—just as they are in the United States; mere criticisms of the government, however, whether by groups or individuals, are not considered to be seditious or criminal.

Cubans are able to receive U.S. television stations, many U.S. radio stations, and broadcasts from the B.B.C., as well as a wide variety of cultural and educational programs on Cuban stations. The Cubans with whom we spoke regard Radio Marti as an insult to Cuban culture, exploiting and dishonoring the name of their national hero Jose Marti (referred to by Cubans as "The Apostle"), and appealing to consumerist values and a nostalgia for prerevolutionary Cuba.

Cubans may travel freely within Cuba, although travel abroad is restricted. We ourselves were free to travel wherever we wanted while in Cuba.

Black and Spanish Cubans live and work freely together. The one Black person in our U.S. group stated, in a sermon preached in a Cuban Presbyterian Church, that, in Cuba, for the first time in his life, he felt no color-line dividing Blacks from others in a society. Martin Luther King is cited frequently as a hero to Cuban people, both Afro-Cubans and Spanish-Cubans.

Whereas there is much hostility to homosexual persons in dominant Cuban culture, including Christian and secular traditions (very much as in dominant U.S. Christian and secular culture), there seems to be no active widespread political persecution of gays and lesbians in Cuban society. Though homosexuality is not illegal, we were unable to determine, to our satisfaction, that homosexuals are not treated differently from heterosexuals under Cuban criminal law. There are vague laws against "public scandal" which may be invoked and enforced against homosexuals in discriminatory ways.

It is true that "freedom" in Cuba does not constitute a license to "do one's own thing" at the expense of the common well-being of society. At the same time, every Cuban with whom we spoke (including those who are critical of Communist rule) attested to the generally open character of Cuban society. Every woman, man and child has access to material, educational, and cultural resources, and there is much encouragement to pursue one's gifts within the context of the needs of the society and individual ability.

C. Political and Economic System

In the United States we are told that the people of Cuba are alienated from their government and fearful of the direction the revolution is taking.

In Cuba we learned that the vast majority of Cubans are deeply

proud of what their nation has achieved since the revolution. Most Cubans are strongly committed to the general directions of the policies their government is pursuing. A 91 year old woman church parishioner and several other elderly women in churches we visited told us that whereas they don't "approve of communism," they are proud of the revolutionary achievements of their nation and are grateful to be citizens of Cuba.

In the United States we are told that the daily life of Cubans is one of repression and fear.

In Cuba, we saw a society where people go about their daily life enthusiastically, and where a lively and cooperative spirit prevails in the streets, shops, schools, beaches, and public gatherings. Cordiality and trust are apparent among Cubans and toward visitors, and courtesy and respect between municipal, provincial and national officials and the citizens they serve. Political participation is broadening, manifested in the neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and in the national assembly.

In the United States we have been told that the U.S. policy of isolating Cuba and punishing its government for "expansionism" has been successful.

In Cuba we realized that U.S. isolation of Cuba has functioned chiefly to distort the perceptions of U.S. citizens about contemporary Cuban life. It curtails the freedom of the church in the U.S.A. to relate to fellow Christians in Cuba and therefore curtails the mission of the U.S. church. Our policy has also pressed hardest against Cuban Christians (always a minority in Cuban culture, and since the departure of so many U.S.-identified Christians, now a small minority) who find it more difficult to maintain valued ecumenical ties.

In the United States we are told that the Cuban economy is "utterly dependent" on the Soviet Union.

In Cuba we learned that the Cuban economy is stabilized by equitable trade relation agreements with socialist countries, including but not limited to the U.S.S.R. A fixed price for exported sugar (30 cents per pound) and a stable price for imported oil, plus low interest loans, maintain a balance of payments and concomitantly a healthy economy. Persons with whom we spoke indicated that Cuban economic policy is aimed at developing the maximum possible degree of self-reliance.

In the United States we hear that the Cuban economy is in shambles, that a noncapitalist economy fails to generate growth.

In Cuba we observed a remarkable level of economic development,

including the manufacture of heavy agricultural and industrial machinery, and numerous signs of economic vitality in the production of goods and services. There are still many problems to be resolved: there is a housing shortage in spite of massive increases in available housing; transportation is still somewhat inadequate, and environmental protections have not been developed sufficiently. But poverty and the diseases associated with it have been eliminated. Free medical care has achieved dramatic increases in life expectancy; hospitals and medical clinics are numerous and accessible in all sections of the country. The people of Cuba are well-clothed and well-fed. Children and their well-being is a social priority. Education is free and required through the eighth grade level; Cuba's literacy rate is higher than that of the U.S. Cultural, scientific, and technical education is available to those who qualify, on a scale unimaginable before the revolution—or in most other societies. Numerous Cubans we met proudly describe themselves as a "reading society." Through the open doorways of many homes, even the most modest, we saw television sets and bookcases crammed with books. One of the slogans of the revolution is: "Do not believe, read." The gifts we were given by our Cuban friends were, almost invariably, books.

Some basic foods are rationed, such as: rice (6 pounds per person per month), milk (1 litre per day for children under 14 and adults over 65 years of age), coffee (1 ounce per person per week), and sugar (4 pounds per person per month), so that every Cuban can have an equal share in these limited food stuffs. However, more of these foods can be purchased within the parallel open market system, but at a much higher price.

There are shortages of some consumer goods but we saw no long waiting lines (except for auto repair parts and entrance to restaurants and ice cream parlors!), such as we observed in other socialist countries; and therefore there would seem to be no cause for widespread discontent.

In the United States we have been told that there is no private property in Cuba.

During our stay in Cuba we learned that it is possible to own two houses for one's own use (a principal residence and a vacation home). Moreover, as of July 1, 1985, those who are renting governmental-owned apartments and houses are being given the opportunity to acquire title to their residences, and the rent that they pay (no more than 10% of the salary of the head of the family) will be applied to their purchases. Farmers may carry on their agriculture in co-operatives or they may own farms of up to a thousand acres. Some small businesses are also under private ownership.

D. *The Situation of Women*

In the United States we have been told that few women are leaders and that sexism is still institutionalized.

In Cuba we saw a broad-based participation of women in Cuban life. A high priority of the government is continued rapid increase of women at the leadership level. At the present time 22 members of the 200-member Central Committee of the Communist Party are women. Women constitute 45.1% of trade union leaders in the work place, 38.2% of trade union leaders at the bureau level, 22.7% of the Deputies to annual meetings of the popular peoples' national assembly (Popular Power). Women are 52% of university students, and 49% of technical school students. By comparison with prerevolutionary Cuba, these figures are staggering.

Machismo remains a problem but many men as well as women seek to change old patterns and attitudes, and these changes have been institutionalized in law.

Women in Cuba continue to have a greater responsibility for child care and housework than men, but the Family Code adopted in 1975 mandates equal rights and equal responsibilities for men and women within the family, including shared responsibilities for child care and domestic work.

Women are not harassed on the streets and are free to walk alone anywhere, anytime, in safety.

Women have reproductive freedom: there is access to contraceptives and abortion.

Sex education is provided in all schools.

It seemed to us that the religious communities of Cuba in the main belong to the conservative sector of society in regard to the social role of women, though there are many active Christian women pressing this issue of sexism within their churches and denominations and the Cuban Ecumenical Council.

E. *Culture*

In the United States we are told that Cuba is a joyless, mechanical and nonpluralistic society.

In Cuba we have seen and been welcomed into a society where there is much laughter and celebration, and where popular culture and the arts flourish. Every province has a school for the arts, with freedom of artistic expression. Some of us visited such a school in Matanzas.

Afro-Cuban and Caribbean music exercises a lively influence, and records, including even North American music, are freely available and at comparable prices to those in the U.S.

Most work places have associations where people write poetry and

stories, perform music and sing.

Billboards with revolutionary slogans are frequent, but some signs are clearly for teaching and providing information about the goals of public policy and the achievements of the Cuban people.

Cuba is a beautiful vacation land and all Cuban people now have frequent access to beaches and hotels formerly reserved for the rich. Tourists from many other countries, including Canada and Mexico, visit Cuba frequently. Barriers to travel to Cuba for U.S. citizens have come from the United States government, not from Cuba.

III. *What We Will Do/Our Response?*

In response to our *encuentro*, we have agreed to commit ourselves to action:

In response to U.S. isolation from and hostility toward Cuba,

We Commit Ourselves:

1. To strive to reverse U.S. governmental policies and practices aimed to isolate Cuba and undermine its social, economic, and cultural life: specifically, to work for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba, cessation of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, and restoration of freedom of travel to Cuba for U.S. citizens.

2. To encourage more people from the U.S., particularly from the churches, theological seminaries, and universities, to visit Cuba so they can experience Cuban life themselves and relate directly with the Cuban people.

—In response to the life of Cuban churches and other religious communities,

We Commit Ourselves

1. To work with our Cuban sisters and brothers in realizing their vision of the new Cuban church within a humane, participatory society;

2. To cooperate with Cuban church women in their work for developing sexually-inclusive language, ordination of women, and leadership roles for women in every sector of church life;

3. To encourage and support our Cuban brothers as well as sisters as they seek to achieve complete sexual equality and partnership in the Cuban churches and society.

—In regard to theological education,

We Commit Ourselves

1. To seek in our respective theological schools one or more required courses in liberation theology, i.e., theology which is contextual, involves interaction of reflection and practice, and makes central the participation and experience of marginal persons in the U.S. and other parts of the

world;

2. To challenge our theological schools and churches in the U.S., to re-examine critically their relations to other economic, social, and cultural structures which, because of their racist, sexist, and elitist biases, foster oppression at home and abroad;

3. To facilitate more cross-cultural exchanges among theological educators, students, and other church people in the U.S., Cuba, and other parts of the two-thirds world;

4. To facilitate the exchange of scholarly resources between U.S. and Cuban seminaries, particularly in the areas of feminist theology and theological education in particular perspectives.

—In regard to humane life style,

We Commit Ourselves;

1. To continue to learn from our Cuban sisters and brothers how to live in less competitive, task-oriented ways;

2. To celebrate, as we worship, play, and struggle in partnership in the U.S. toward a more just, participatory, and sustainable society.

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