

## Notes from Exploratory Visit to Cuba, October 10-22, 2016

Cuba has one Synod, and three presbyteries. They are El Centro, Matanzas, and Havana. We divided our time among the presbyteries. There are few or no Presbyterian churches on the far ends of the island (west of Havana or east of El Centro, i.e., towards Guantanamo). Each presbytery has unique characteristics: El Centro is the most rural and has the most aging population (even in the context of the population as a whole); Matanzas houses the seminary, and also includes seaside resorts that draw international tourists; and Havana includes the city of Havana, the largest city in Cuba (with a population of over 2 million).

We stayed at CANIP, a camp serving the entire Synod, in the El Centro presbytery; at the seminary in Matanzas; and at the IPR Luyano in Havana.<sup>1</sup>

The three presbyteries include 33 independent churches and 21 “mission” churches (churches that cannot support a full-time pastor); there are also five mission churches outside of the presbyteries. Thirty-eight pastors serve these churches (14 women and 24 men), supported by 13 retired pastors as well as seminary students and lay leaders. In 2015 these churches had approximately 4,000 members. Seminary students typically begin serving a church even before ordination. The shortage of pastors affects all denominations.

The IPR is both an aging and a very young denomination. For several reasons, church members tend to be over 50 or under 30. Those who are 30—50 are referred to as “young adults,” and represent the generation born immediately after the Revolucion, when church membership was discouraged. “Youth” membership (jovenes) is defined somewhat flexibly, but in general includes those over 15 or 18, up to 25 or 28. “Children” (ninos) are younger than “youth.”

Not all of the churches we visited need partnerships. Some of them have existing partnerships but would welcome additional partners; others have none. Those needs are reflected in the notes below.

With variations related to the location of the church and the size of the congregation, the following are features common to most of the churches we visited:

- Women make up more of the membership of most congregations than men, and take an active role in leadership; many churches have “women’s fraternities” that are something akin to our “Partners in Service” circle. Often the women’s fraternity makes crafts or clothing to sell as a source of support for other church programs. Some churches have separate men’s groups.
- The congregations are disproportionately elderly, in part because of emigration. This is a problem for Cuba as a whole and is probably one of the reasons the government seems to be working with the churches; a lot of the social and emotional care for the elderly has been shifted to local congregations.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Presbyterian church in Cuba is its own denomination. It is sometimes referred to as PRCC, Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba. This report uses IPR, Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada.

- Programs typically directed at the elderly include laundry programs, meal programs, and visiting programs. Some larger churches also have educational and social programs for seniors.
- The category of “young adults” is the most challenging group to reach because they grew up right after the Revolution, when church attendance was discouraged, and because they are so focused on earning a living.
- Rather than separate groups for children, preteens, teens, and college-aged students, most churches have “youth” groups for those aged roughly 15-25, and separate groups for younger children. They often run summer camps or vacation Bible schools in cooperation with other churches (not necessarily limited to Presbyterian churches). It is accepted for children and youth to attend and join churches independently of their parents.
- Many, but not all, of the churches have “Living Water” programs. The churches with Living Water installations typically open their doors to the surrounding community on a regular schedule so that anyone who needs it can get clean water. Some churches are able to do this without restriction; others have to limit the quantities given away. Infrastructure issues make it challenging or, in some cases, impossible, to have a Living Water program. For example, in one church we visited in the Havana presbytery, the church was in the process of building a water storage system in the courtyard behind the sanctuary because the water supply in that city is so irregular that they do not always have running water to keep the system going.

Note: population figures were supplied by members of the various churches, and may or may not be accurate; I included them as a general guide to which towns are larger or smaller. In places this information was supplemented with information gathered in 2015 for a PCUSA mission report.

Barbara Busharis  
Revised 01/09/2017

## Monday, October 10

We arrived at Santa Clara and went directly to CANIP, the national camp where we spent the first four nights.

CANIP was established as a place of respite for both families and clergy. It serves a summer camp program for children, as well as retreats for other groups throughout the year. Its facilities are in need of renovation and expansion. They include a kitchen/dining hall; a pavilion for recreational and music activities; a relatively new dorm for visiting groups that houses approximately 30 people in shared bedrooms, each with their own bath; and older dorms that are used for youth camps and retreats and seem badly in need of updating.

We were told a partnership with CANIP would be possible, either by itself or in connection with a church-to-church partnership. What the partnership would look like needs to be explored, but would almost certainly include financial support for renovations at the camp.

## Tuesday, October 11: El Centro Presbytery

### IPR de Encrucijada [needs partners]



Encrucijada is a town of approximately 30,000 near Santa Clara; the church has 18 members and 8 children, including 5 special needs children. They have a women's group, men's group, and youth group, and they offer Sunday school classes for adults and children. Their major challenge is involving children and youth. They have a small building, in need of maintenance and repair, and no full-time pastor. We met with several elders and Rev. Marielys Cabrera, who serves this and another church. She is married to a fellow pastor, Rev. Jesus Rodriguez.

Encrucijada had a congregation of 200 before the Revolution. A meal program that was funded by an outside church has been discontinued. The congregation had a relationship with a church in North Carolina about ten years ago, but has no current partners.

### **IPR de Calabazar de Sagua [needs partners]**



This province has the highest proportion of elderly residents in all of Cuba. The area is very rural. The town has 25,000 inhabitants. The church has 40 to 50 members; that number includes 15-20 children and youth. Most of the parents of the children, teens, and youth do not attend the church themselves; this is typical, partly because many of those parents were born after the Revolution, when church attendance was discouraged. The church has a women's group and youth group.

The church is celebrating its 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary this month. It is currently served by Rev. Dahlia Valdes and a seminarian.

The biggest challenge facing their youth and young adults is emigration.

### **IPR de Sagua la Grande (Santa Fe) [needs partners]**



This church meets in a historic building obtained in a trade with the government. They are limited in what they can do with the building. They have a relationship with the Santa Fe presbytery and have a sister church in Baltimore; the sister church helps them with the exchange of raw materials and crafts, which in turn supports travel between the churches. The Santa Fe presbytery also assisted in the renovation of the sanctuary in 2006. The pastor is Dahlia Valdes.

The congregation has a breakfast program and an active women's group. Twice a month they also provide a dinner for local elderly residents. They used to give music lessons, but now their piano is not in good enough condition to continue doing that.

The population of the town is 35,000; the church has about 80 members, mostly adults. There are some children, but not many youth or young adults. The city is close to the ocean and used to be an important harbor, but is no longer a commercial center. Emigration for jobs (both within Cuba and to other countries) is a problem.

**Wednesday, October 12**

**IPR de Placetas [needs partners]**



This congregation is about 105 years old, and currently includes 40 adult members along with 70 children and youth. It is located in Placetas, which is a crossroads for the province, with a population of about 75,000. The church maintains a mission church in a nearby neighborhood with activities and social programs. The church has a strong youth program with Sunday school classes for all ages. Sometimes children lead the services. The church also has two prayer houses, one of which is ecumenical. Women are very involved in church leadership; of the five current Sunday school instructors, all are women.

The church has several programs for the elderly (both in the congregation and the community), including a laundry program. In addition, they are hoping to start working with people with cancer; Cuba has a high cancer rate.<sup>2</sup>

The church is going to celebrate “Thanksgiving” on November 24.

The church meets in a house because a sanctuary is under construction (on a site where a previous church had to be demolished after falling into disrepair). Considerable funding will be required to bring the project to completion. We were told the Synod has made this a priority.

The pastor, Rev. Jesus Rodriguez, is married to another pastor (Marielys Cabrera). They are both from this area. He emphasized the congregation really enjoys music and said they are “very open to people with differences,” including LGBT members. One of the biggest challenges facing the congregation is finishing the new church building under construction across the street from the building where they currently meet. Jesus also said the age group of 30- to 50-year-olds (i.e., those born in the generation after the Revolution) are very difficult to engage, even those who are active in the community.



---

<sup>2</sup> Cuba’s cancer rate is comparable to that in the United States. An interactive chart showing the incidence of various causes of death around the world is available at <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/cause-of-death/all-cancers/by-country/>. An interesting report on health issues in Cuba, published by the Pan American Health Organization in 2012, is available at [http://www.paho.org/salud-en-las-americanas-2012./index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=125&Itemid=](http://www.paho.org/salud-en-las-americanas-2012./index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=125&Itemid=).

### **IPR de Cabaiguan [does not need partners]**

The church in Cabaiguan was founded in 1907; we met with elders, because the minister was visiting in the United States at the time of our visit. The lay leadership in the church appears to be very strong, and there are approximately 70 members. The church is next door to a primary school which, at one time, was run by the church; it was nationalized after the Revolution. Cabaiguan is a town of approximately 30,000. An oil refinery is located there, and the elders noted that the refinery and other manufacturing have had environmental and health effects.



The church has a Living Water project, seven non-denominational prayer houses, and various social programs, including programs for the elderly. It categorizes its ministries children's, elderly, worship, and social programs (including a laundry and a breakfast program). They serve elderly non-member as well as members. Their choir is well known locally. Their women's fraternity is named Dorcas. One of the elders noted that the Living Water project has had a beneficial impact on the health of the local community. They give away 2000 liters of water every week.



as

### **IPR de Sancti Spiritus [does not need partners]**

The pastor, Luidmila Hernandez, was ordained a little less than two years ago in this church. The church itself was founded by American missionaries in 1902, and held its first worship service on May 4, 1902. The first worship service in the current building took place in 1920. Sancti Spiritus has two mission or "dependent" churches; one is in a neighborhood where poverty and violence are issues, and the other is in a rural location where a previous church was destroyed by a hurricane.



The church has meal programs for 40 people; an important music program; a Living Water installation (since 2012); fraternities for women, men, and youth; and an active young adult program. There are approximately 100-110 members, including children. The surrounding city has 100,000 inhabitants. Sancti Spiritus is in the third "oldest" province in the country, demographically.

The church has a sister church in Springfield, IL, and previously had a partnership with a church in Switzerland. Luidmila emphasized that a partnership would ideally be a long-term relationship, involving a written covenant between the two churches. Ongoing communication would be essential. Note: the church has better facilities for visitors than some of the smaller churches.



**Thursday, October 13**

**IPR de Iguara [needs partners]**



Iguara was organized as a mission church in 1995. The lay pastor, Lester Manso, was studying IT and teaching computers at a high school when he offered to work for the church. He left that job to work full-time with the church, and is currently finishing studies in theology. When he arrived the church had about 15 adult members; now in addition to the adults there are about 17 teens who attend regularly, so that there are 25-30 people in every service. Services are held on Saturday evening so that the teens can sleep on Sunday morning, because that is typically the only day they can sleep in.

Iguara is a town of approximately 4,000 in a very rural area. The primary economic activity in the area is farming; Lester said many of the farmers own their property, so the town is able to retain some of the younger people, who stay to work on the family property rather than leaving for other work.

The church has three prayer houses. It has a laundry program that serves about 20 needy persons in the town. They used to have a meal project; that is not operating at the moment, but they hope to resume it. On Wednesdays Lester meets with teens and youth for Bible study, games, and fellowship. There is also a Sunday school class for children.

Lester mentioned two children in the congregation who have special needs. Sometimes church members go to the children's homes and hold Bible studies or activities there. They can always use antibiotic ointment and Desitin to help with the children's needs. The church does not have visitor's quarters but is within driving distance of some churches that do.



**IPR de Meneses [needs partners]**

The church at Meneses is closely tied to the church at Iguara, but is currently without a pastor. Mercedes, an elder, has been instrumental in revitalizing the church, and serves as a lay leader. Lester serves as its treasurer. It celebrated its 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary the night before our visit. It is located in a town of approximately 11,000 people.



A year and a half ago, the church was down to 4 members. Now 30-40 people attend regularly, even though there is no minister to preside over worship. The church has 24 adult members, and the others who attend are children and youth. One of the problems with calling a pastor will be that the church doesn't have housing, and the law doesn't allow the congregation to buy or build a house for a new pastor. They are considering building a rooftop apartment over the church. Next year the session

will increase from two to four members. The executive secretary of the presbytery comes once a month to offer communion. Services are held on Saturday nights.

Despite these challenges, the church runs a laundry program for 10 elderly people; provides meals twice a month for 24 elderly people; and has a sewing program involving three seamstresses. They are teaching about ten girls (ages 11-13) to sew and do crafts.

### **IPR de Caibarien [does not need partners]**



The Presbyterian church arrived in this town in 1892, and one of its major accomplishments was founding a school. At one time the school had as many as 300 students. The school was nationalized after the Revolution, along with a bakery that was also owned by the church. The church was largely empty after that, with 10 or fewer congregants regularly in attendance; it started to grow again in the late 1980s. Now there are 82 adult members, and the programs are largely self-sustaining. The pastor, Edelberto Valdes, has been here for eight years. He is in his early 60s and is also the executive secretary of the Presbytery.

The church has three prayer houses, including a prayer house that brings in 25-30 children every Saturday. There is a Tuesday morning prayer service, a Wednesday bible study (sometimes using movies), and a Sunday evening service. Sunday mornings are used for Sunday school. The church extends communion to the sick one Thursday each month.

In addition to these services, the church runs a meal program that feeds 30-40 people three times a week; a sewing workshop; and English classes. It also supports a mission church.<sup>3</sup> The leadership is considering developing the third floor of a building adjoining the sanctuary as a pastor's residence.



Caibarien is on the northern coast of Cuba; it is not a major tourist destination itself, but is close enough to the Cuban Keys (Los Cayos) that many people from Caibarien work in tourism in some capacity. It has a population of a little over 30,000.

---

<sup>3</sup> The mission church is in Camaguey, which is a considerable distance from Caibarien. According to the 2015 information on El Centro Presbytery, Edelberto travels there once per quarter



**Friday, October 14**

**IPR de Jaguey Grande [needs partners]**

Pastor Liz Elena Capo has been here for one year; she studied at Matanzas for five years. The church has strong lay leadership, including Ofelia, an elder who is studying at Matanzas as well. Ofelia has maintained a mail ministry since 2008 and corresponds with people around the world.



The town is named for oranges, the main crop in this area. It has a population of about 60,000 (including surrounding areas; the town itself is listed as having a population of about 30,000). The church has about 60-70 members, including 16-20 children and youth; 20-25 people are usually in worship. The session has three members. The church has groups for children and youth, as well as a women's fraternity. The area is very rural and traditional; services are held early so that women can get home and cook meals, and most of the attendees are women.

The church bought a sewing machine recently and plans to start a sewing program. They will be starting a breakfast program for about 20 elderly persons in December. The church also hosts worships on topics like violence and gender, and taking care of the environment (Guardians of Creation was mentioned). The church had a prayer house, but at the moment does not have one; Ofelia has gotten permission to start one in her home. They are creating "visiting teams" that will divide the congregation into groups; elders will visit each group weekly and report back on the people they have visited.

In a conversation after our meeting Liz told one of our group members that the church does not yet have a Living Water program; they would like to have one, but the church has to pay a variable rate for the water it receives, and until a more stable rate can be negotiated the cost of water would be prohibitive. (The cost of water is not uniform from one town to another; some municipalities still do not charge, although this is changing.)



## Saturday, October 15: Matanzas Presbytery

### IPR de El Fuerte [needs partners]

El Fuerte is the Second Presbyterian church of Cardenas; it became independent in 2012, but there has been a congregation here for almost 60 years (the church celebrated its 58<sup>th</sup> anniversary this month). The church has 61 members, but also has regular visitors, so that 80 people are often in attendance at worship. Most of the members are over 50. There are only three young adults. The pastor is the youngest member of the congregation; he was not present when we visited because he was in the U.S., but we were greeted by a group of elders. One of the members here is Ofelia Ortega's sister Rosa.



The church is in an area of Cardenas that is growing. The population of the city is approximately 80,000. However, emigration is a problem. Leaving to work in the tourist industry is the main reason there are so few young adults in the congregation. Emigration also means that a large number of elderly members (and elderly residents of the town in general) live alone, and many suffer from isolation.

The two main social programs the church provides are meals and water. About 10 people get breakfast at the church every morning, and they also serve lunch after services on Sunday. They have had a Living Water program for about 5 years and it has been very successful. The Living Water system was installed by members of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. One of the elders mentioned that the town recently had a cholera outbreak, but that no one who got water from the church got sick. The church distributes about 700 gallons of purified water three days a week. They do not have to pay (yet) for city water. There is no charge for the purified water, but they accept donations.

In addition, the church has a laundry program, and hosts a prayer house, with Bible study, every Tuesday morning. The members are committed to ecumenical outreach; they provide a meeting space for 7<sup>th</sup>-day Adventists, as well as for other groups.



### IPR de Cardenas [does not need partners]

Cardenas is one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in Cuba, founded in 1890. The church ran a large and very well regarded school, La Progressiva, which was nationalized after the Revolution. However, the local community still remembers the school with pride, and some of the older members were students there. Education is a strength of the community in general.



The church has 110 members, and about 15 children; 80 to 90 are in attendance most Sundays. The session consists of seven elders. They support four missions, three in town, and one about five kilometers from town, where weekly meetings take place.

Pastors Alison Infante and his wife, Sarahi, arrived four years ago. They spoke about analyzing the needs of the community and revamping programs to fit local needs and strengths. There are many retired teachers in the community, but they needed to find a way to work with young people and teens. One program that resulted from their analysis was a music and art program for children and youth. Another was a new Bible study program geared towards youth and young adults, and a Wednesday night program for young adults. In addition, a retired professor currently provides after-school classes to help prepare local students for university study.

The music school is important for other ministries of the church. Recently the church hosted a program on climate change that incorporated music. They were able to include two representatives of the government as well. As a result of the success of this program the church helped to start a new course on theology (and ecology) at Matanzas. The seminary also sends someone to Cardenas every three weeks for ecumenical instruction.



When we were there the church was displaying a series of photographs of a pilgrimage to Mecca. The pastor told us these were taken by a small group of Cuban Muslims who made the trip themselves. When the photos were first displayed the church hosted a program that was open to the community.

The church has a number of programs for the elderly, including a senior citizens program two mornings a week that addresses physical, emotional, and psychological needs. They use story-telling, among other things (getting the elderly to tell their stories). They are hoping to expand the program to about 30 participants. One of the biggest problems in Cuba, the pastors said, is isolation in the elderly population. Another problem is that many caregivers lack training and education about the special needs of the elderly. The church wants to develop some programs that will support the elderly ministry, such as selling meals or crafts.

Once a month the church hosts speakers on various topics. The church also hosts activities such as dance classes. They have a Living Water installation.

One institution unique to Cardenas is the Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue, which used to be part of this church, but is now an independent institution. When the pastors arrived the church was more “closed” from the community because community outreach was seen as the province of the CCRD. This has now changed.

### **IPR de Varaderas [does not need partners]**



The church in Varaderas has about 140 members, and also has a high number of visitors year-round because it is located one of the main tourist centers for the country. The church has social and community programs but, because of its location, their main focus is hospitality to visiting groups, and supporting other churches in the region. For example, they host groups of children, including “orphans” and children with disabilities, as well as elderly persons, who come to the area for vacations. The church also has a sewing program and maintains an organic garden.

The session has anywhere from five to nine elders; the pastor (Joel Ortega Dopico) was not present because he was traveling. He is president of the Council of Churches in Cuba. He has been the pastor since 2002.

## **Sunday, October 16**

### **IPR de la Playa [needs partners]**



This church started 90 years ago; at the time the neighborhood was a relatively rural neighborhood inhabited by fishermen. The government gave the church land to build a chapel in 1956; the church was also associated with a school, which was later nationalized. The congregation was able to rebuild the chapel in 1994 and become an independent church. However, because pastors came and went, the church depended more on lay leaders and elders than on any one pastor. Currently the pastor is Rev. Leticia Ramos, who also serves the mission church at Manguito and the nearby church of San Jose de Los Ramos (described below).

The current building dates from 2007. It has a small kitchen and the sanctuary also serves as a fellowship hall. The first pastor in residence, Daniel Montoya, was called here in 2008. Rev. Ramos described it as a “neighborhood” church rather than a city church, although the area has become very developed. Most people live nearby, but some members travel across town to get there. There are 50 members, most of them over 60; there are no children at the moment, but a few teens and youth. Migration is an issue.

The church has Living Water, but their most important programs are for the elderly. They provide meals each week; they also provide a “beauty salon” for elderly members, and twice a year, with the help of other churches, they distribute eyeglasses. They have a sewing program.



Part of our group attended Sunday morning worship here. In addition to the pastor, the service was led by a young worship leader/cantor. Music was used throughout the service. The liturgy was in many ways a traditional Presbyterian liturgy, beginning with a call to worship and confession, then hearing and proclaiming the word, followed by prayers and offerings. The prayers of the people were separated into prayers of intercession and prayers of thanksgiving; during prayers of thanksgiving several people rose to give a specific offering of thanksgiving.

### **IPR de Union de Reyes**

Part of our group worshipped here on Sunday morning. One notable feature of the service was the involvement of a young lay leader who appeared to be involved in almost all aspects of the service. Although she is still in high school, she teaches Sunday School and directs the children's choir. Whether the church currently needs partners is unknown. It is served by Rev. Beidy Casas, who is based in Matanzas, and a seminarian.

## **Monday, October 17**

### **Mission de Manguito [needs partners]**

This is a small community of about 5000 inhabitants; farming is the main industry. There used to be three sugar cane factories in the area, but two are closed. The church is a mission church that has about 22 active members and approximately 10 regular visitors. They also serve 15 children and 4 youth. The church building was rebuilt about five years ago after the roof collapsed. The treasurer of the session is a member of the Havana Presbytery youth organization and is planning to go to seminary.

Even though it is a mission church and does not have a full-time pastor, they gather every Saturday afternoon for services. We were accompanied by the pastor who serves the church, Beiti, who is located in Matanzas. They hold a Bible study twice a month, and have a program of visitation for the sick and elderly. The elders who met with us noted there are no specialists in town, only primary care physicians. There are seven denominations in the town, and the churches have strong connections; for example, an AA group meets in the Catholic church, but this church has offered the group space for special celebrations.



The church does not have the resources for many social programs, but a member who is a former baseball coach is starting a baseball program that will serve about 30 boys. He hopes to add a league for girls in the near future. The church has one partnership with University Presbyterian in Baton Rouge.

### **IPR de San Jose de los Ramos [needs partners]**



This community is similar in size and economic activity to the community at Manguito, and the church also lacks a full-time pastor. It was founded in 1905. The session has eight members, three of whom are “active,” and one of those is training to be a pastor. There are approximately 36 members and 12-15 regular visitors.

The church has a very active youth group and band; there are about 10 children. It has a Living Water project open to the community three days a week, and gives away about 2000 liters of water each day. A sister church provided the Living Water program 2-3 years ago. The church currently does not have the resources to provide all the social programs it would like, such as a meal, sewing, or laundry program. However, they have a reading program, a prayer house, Sunday school, weekly music rehearsal, and weekly Bible study.



## **Tuesday, October 18: Havana Presbytery**

### **IPR de Guines [does not need partners]**



Guines is a town about 30 miles from Havana; it has a population of approximately 65,000. The church has a Living Water program and several partnerships. Its current pastor, Rev. Abel Mirabal, has used music (he and his family have their own rock band) to get the community, particularly young people, involved in the church. It has good facilities for visitors.



### **IPR de Nueva Paz and Mission de Vegas [need partners]**



We visited the mission church, Las Vegas, before going to the IPR of Nueva Paz. [If they were to form a partnership it would be with both churches.] Las Vegas is a small congregation, with 10 members, that has been restoring its old sanctuary, which was originally a wooden building; it is in great need of a new roof. We met with elders who described the congregation as a small family. It has been in existence for 87 years. Services are held here on Saturday nights so that a pastor can be here on Saturdays and back in Nueva Paz on Sundays. The current pastors serving these two churches are Marielis Diaz, who we were told would be moving soon, and Izett Sama, the pastor at IPR de Los Palos.



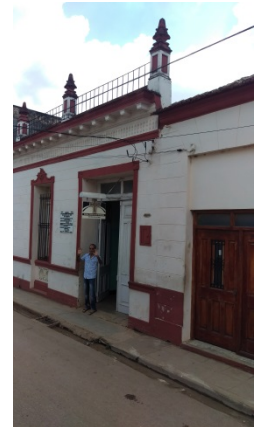
The church at Nueva Paz is 112 years old and meets in a sanctuary that has been beautifully restored. The community is small, with many elderly, children, and youth, but fewer young adults. The population of the town is 11,000. The church has 35 members and 20 youth, along with regular visitors; there are usually about 60 people in worship. The women's group is very active and hosts special celebrations for holidays, along with running a cooking project and sewing project. The women sell crafts to support some of their programs. The program for teens and youth also appears to be thriving. The weekly schedule includes Sunday services, Sunday school, a prayer house open on Tuesdays, a youth meeting on Wednesdays, and a speaker series on the last Friday of each month.



## **Wednesday, October 19**

### **IPR de San Antonio de los Banos [needs partners]**

This church is about an hour outside of Havana in a town of 45,000, known for its annual Humor Festival (it is also the location of an association for editors of satirical cartoons). It is a major city for the province. The pastor, Armando Guedez, and his wife, Jaquelin, have been here for four months. The church has 80 members, plus 13 youth and 10 children; the session includes four elders.





The church has a Living Water program and they are working on expanding their storage, because the municipal water system is problematic; sometimes water is not available. The Living Water system was installed about four years ago; the U.S. church that installed it sometimes buys filters for the congregation. Up to 80 people from the community get water at the church every day.

Members take lunch to 30 elderly people on Sundays, and also visit the residents in three local “care homes” (senior residences). Economic problems and isolation are problems for many elderly residents.

Armando identified the church’s biggest challenge as “keeping harmony in the midst of diversity.”

#### **First Presbyterian Havana [does not need partners]**



**IPR de Luyvano [does not need partners]**

We stayed here for two nights in dorm-style accommodations. The church has rooms that house 8-10 men and women in bedrooms with 4-5 beds and a shared bath. The current pastor, Daniel Izquierdo, is a leader in the Synod and is on the board of the seminary. However, we were told he may be leaving this location in the near future.

The church was started in the 1920s as a mission of First Church in Havana. It is in a very urban area and the residents of the surrounding area deal with problems including domestic violence, drug use, alcohol abuse, child abuse and neglect. The church has about 100 members. It runs a breakfast program; exercise classes and tai chi for elderly persons; an after-school program for children once a week; and weekly English classes. The sanctuary also hosts concerts. Daniel expressed concern that an increase in American tourists will overwhelm the existing infrastructure. Tourism is already having a serious economic and environmental impact.



***[Thursday, October 20 and Friday, October 21, were primarily reserved for group discussion and reflection.]***



## Saturday, October 22

### IPR de Los Palos [needs partners]

The pastor here, Izett Sama, formerly served the church at San Antonio de los Banos. She has been at Los Palos for 10 years. This is a town of about 8000 people. The church has 42 members and 30 children attending, as well as a number of regular visitors who are not members. There are about 11 elders and deacons leading various projects.



The women's group keeps a vegetable garden and has a sewing/craft project to raise money. A food program provides lunch for elderly members of the community twice a month, using food donated by other community members. The church has a Living Water program that provides clean water three days a week and on Sunday mornings. They have seen a decrease in illness in the surrounding community thanks to the Living Water, especially in the summer.



The congregation purchased a house across the street from the sanctuary and uses it as a community center. They host different groups, hold classes and workshops (e.g., workshops for teens and parents on family communication, and workshops for women who are in violent or economically dependent relationships), and bring in a wide variety of cultural programs (music, plays, movies). They also give space to local artists, musicians, and poets. During the most recent school vacation they had a week-long program for children and teens on the theme of Ernest Hemingway, including a visit to the Hemingway museum in Havana. A monthly speaker series focuses on preparing people to live in a changing society. They are also sponsoring a youth soccer team.

In addition to services on Saturday nights, there is Sunday School, and a Thursday night Bible study.

Thanks to support from a church in Southampton, NY, the church has comfortable guest quarters for 12 above the sanctuary (two rooms, each with a bath, with three bunk beds in each room). When we visited, one of the rooms was being used by two students from Germany who are on a "gap year" program with the IPR, and the other was being used by a seminarian.