

January 23rd, 2015, seven Friends gathered in Miami, Florida, preparing for a 12-day visit to Cuba, more specifically to the Friends of Cuba Yearly Meeting. This is an annual trip through Friends United Meeting (FUM), led and planned by New Association member Linda Garrison. There were seven of us: Linda Garrison (New Association), John and Carol Munson (West Hills in Northwest YM), Jeannine Laverty (New York YM), Deena Kinsky (New England YM), and me, Michael Sherman (New Association). In Cuba, we swept, hauled, cleaned, painted, prayed, sung, dedicated, worshiped, crafted, and preached. But the main objective of going to Cuba was and is fellowship, “walking cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone.”

For FUM and the variety of yearly meetings and individuals under its umbrella, building relationships that go beyond the stereotypes and generalizations we each hold about the other is important. With a breadth of representation across FUM, we were able to see each other as more than the yearly meeting or association to which we belong but also as individuals who love and hope and weep and mourn; people more like “us” than “them.” We also benefitted by having members of West Hills, a meeting in Evangelical Friends International on the trip, further stretching the preconceptions of Friends. It was good to learn about and meet Friends from across the spectrum of theological and worship identities.

This is my second trip to Cuba within the past year. This trip took us to a community in Cuba that has rarely had the opportunity to see someone as tall as I (6’6”). I overheard a couple of older women, walking past the church as we were painting, talking about my size, and giggling about my being big enough to be in a carnival. My physical appearance was/is an easy line of exclusion to draw. I know what it is like to desperately want to be seen beyond simply my physical identity. Seeing and being seen, as we are, is why we went to Cuba.

We opened our hearts to each other as traveling companions, with conversations about programmed and un-programmed, about the ways in which each has a tendency to fall short of the glory of God. We made ourselves available to be loved as well as to be vulnerable to pain and sorrow as brokenness met brokenness.

We opened our hearts to the Cubans we met in the six different meetings we visited. We laughed a lot. Wednesday night in the small community of Bocas, we gathered for worship and a baby dedication. One of the benches was overtaxed by the weight of our Cuban and American fellowship and broke with a loud crack. It was a great way to gather in our frailty before God.

We didn’t fly to Cuba to cry, but because we were able to open our hearts to the love and generosity we found in the many faces we met, tears were present each time we left a city or a meeting.

This kind of interaction is especially important for the relationship between North American Friends and Cuba Yearly Meeting. Not only may their theology and practice somewhat differ from mine, but they look different as well. Whether we like it or not, physical appearance is an easy line of exclusion, and a difficult obstacle to overcome in creating community and finding fellowship. We’d probably like another truth in our relationship with our Cuban neighbors, but

we just find it easier to move about the world using preconceptions. And the “mysterious other” is one of the many tools God uses to help us grow and stretch into the people to which God has called us.

“No one is so rich in spiritual resources they can neglect whatever can be learned from anybody who can teach them.” --Elton Trueblood, *A People Called Quakers*