



Defending our rights to travel to Cuba

• Our Experiences on the 16th Annual Pastors for Peace
Friendshipment to Cuba

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As American citizens we have been increasingly dismayed for some time at the policies of our government. "Lawlessness" - domestic as well as international - seems to be the basic thread which unites these policies - whether it is the violations of the United Nations Charter, the flouting of international agreements against torture and arbitrary detention, the theft of elections, or the undermining of constitutionally guaranteed civil rights.

To make matters worse this has been taking place with very little opposition from the Democratic Party. In such a situation we could not escape the feeling that even the limited democracy, which had existed in the United States, has been disintegrating. How could we respond? When established political institutions cease to care for people, there is no alternative but to take matters into one's own hands. Gradually we came to the conclusion that we needed to take some action.

Of course, the lawlessness of US authorities is nothing new for Cuban citizens. For forty-five years Cubans have borne the brunt of terrorist attacks, invasion, and an economic blockade from the United States as it tried to break the revolution. Cuba has stood up to this pressure, never surrendering or compromising its sovereignty or the right to put into practice its ideas of solidarity with the peoples of the world.

We had read about Pastors for Peace, and we admired their humanitarian efforts toward Cuba. So it came to pass that we were compelled to join the 16th Pastors for Peace Friendshipment to Cuba - a direct action challenging the US blockade of Cuba.

After filing the necessary applications with Pastors for Peace, we waited anxiously for July 17th to arrive - the day we would fly from Boston to McAllen, Texas to join the Caravan. In McAllen the Caravan was encamped at the Eugene de Mazenod Renewal Center, where final preparations were being made for crossing the border into Mexico. For four days we worked to get things ready with 120 other caravanistas, people from all walks of life, people of many different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, people who ranged in age from 13 to 94. We

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prepared lists of the thousands of pounds of aid that had been donated. We made sure we would not be bringing anything which would violate Mexican Customs. This year Pastors for Peace made a special effort to collect supplies for disabled and handicapped individuals. In addition to bicycles, and medicines, there were crutches, wheel chairs, and equipment for people with breathing problems. And we had a number of computers for Cuban school children.

We painted our buses in honor of the Five Cuban Prisoners. Each one of the five buses carried the name of one of the men. We formed affinity groups in order to get to know each other better. We participated in discussions on civil disobedience, or as our leader, Lucius Walker, prefers to call it, "civil obedience" - obedience to an authority higher than that of the United States government. We participated in informational sessions on Cuban culture, aimed at preparing us to be better guests. And yes, we also had some unscheduled meetings to work out disagreements among us, as we began to build the group solidarity that we would need for our journey.

One key aspect of the Caravan is the direct challenge to the economic blockade which involves bringing supplies to Cuba. Another aspect of the trip is called the "reverse challenge", and involves bringing supplies back from Cuba to the United States. One particularly interesting meeting involved a discussion of a decision by the leadership of the Caravan that the only things we would bring back from Cuba would be items which had been agreed on by the Caravan leadership and had been donated by Cuban authorities. The reason for this was to limit ourselves to certain items, to which it would be very difficult for US authorities to object. This meant that members of the Caravan would not be able to shop in Cuba for souvenirs. Perhaps you can imagine what it is like to try to convince a group of North Americans that although they are going to a foreign country, they won't be doing any shopping. Such a task took all the powers of persuasion and education of Lucius Walker, but in the end the group agreed. After all we were not traveling to Cuba as tourists - we were going to challenge the blockade and to show our solidarity with the Cuban people.

While most of the group engaged in these activities some members of the Caravan attended to special responsibilities. The bus drivers made sure that the short wave radios linking every bus for communication were in working order. A few of our leaders made several trips across the border to work with the Mexican authorities to facilitate our passage through Mexico. For reasons we could not understand at the time, the Mexican authorities insisted that we divide the lists of our supplies into two parts: one part was to list all computers and computer components. The other part listed the rest of our supplies.

On July 21, following a brief press conference with a local reporter, our caravan of buses and cars set off for the border town of Hidalgo, Texas, where we planned to cross into Mexico. In the past several years the

Caravan did not encounter any resistance from the US authorities. They seemed to feel that the best policy was to pretend that the Caravan didn't exist, and to assist the Caravan in making its way as quickly as possible without incident or publicity. But this year it was different.

When we reached the border, our Caravan was stopped. While we waited a few people decided to get off the bus and stretch their legs. All of a sudden word come over our short wave radio that we were all to get back on the buses, lock the doors and not let anyone on. It turned out that our first bus, which carried a number of our leaders, had encountered resistance from the US authorities. They wanted to come onto the bus and inspect it. There were some serious legal questions as to whether the US officials had the right to do this. Lucius was in telephone communication with a lawyer for Pastors for Peace who is an expert in this area. She was advising him as to how the Caravan should respond. Lucius insisted that he be provided with a copy of the regulations which authorized the search of our vehicles. The officials could not produce such a document. However, after a period of negotiations it was decided to allow the authorities to enter the first bus and conduct an inspection.

The officials entered the bus, examined the supplies and proceeded to confiscate anything related to computers. It was not at all clear that they had a right to do this, and so another round of consultations with our lawyers and negotiations with the US officials took place. In the meantime it was decided that the caravanistas would come off the buses, and stage a protest on the road as the border traffic was passing by. Some of the members of the group made signs and held an impromptu demonstration letting passing cars know what was going on. At the same time, other members of the group began walking some of the aid across the border. We hoped that the image of caravanistas being forced to walk across the border with crutches and wheelchairs, amongst others things, might symbolize the senselessness and cruelty of the blockade.

Eventually it was decided to attempt to send a second bus through. When the US authorities confiscated the computers on this bus as well, the group decided to retreat from the border in order to analyze the situation. Since it appeared the authorities were confiscating only computer-related equipment, it was decided to reorganize the material on the buses. All computer equipment was placed on one of the buses, while all the other aid was placed on the other buses. It was decided to hold back the bus with computers and send the other buses through to Mexico. A small contingent of the Caravan, along with Lucius Walker, would remain with the bus that had the computers and attempt to mount a political campaign from Texas for the return of the confiscated computers, and the right to take all the computers to Cuba. The rest of the Caravan would proceed through Mexico with the aid and fly to Cuba.

Time was getting short. The Caravan had to fly from Tampico, Mexico the morning of July 23rd. After hours of delay in Mexican Customs, the

caravanistas were finally on their way. An all night bus ride from Reynosa, Mexico brought us to Tampico in the early morning. We had a couple of hours of rest before heading to the airport and our flight to Cuba. In Tampico, thirty Mexican citizens joined the Caravan. Our group now numbered 150.

It would take many pages to describe the rich experiences we had traveling in Cuba for a week. Most memorable were our meetings with ordinary Cuba citizens in Havana and Havana Province; our trip to the International Medical School (where 70 US students are studying along with other students from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean), and to the International School for Physical Education and Sport where we saw hundreds of students from Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Over and over again we saw how Cuba takes care of its people and also helps the world. It is amazing what Cuba is doing with its limited resources. We visited a day program for elderly people, a women's committee, community workers and their families at a tobacco collective, and religious leaders who helped us understand the relation of the church to the government in Cuba. We were honored to attend the 26th of July festivities at the Karl Marx Theater where Fidel Castro spoke.

And of course we left the group for brief periods to visits with Cuban friends we met during previous trips. At the end of the trip we were able to hear from family members of the five Cuban prisoners, as well as Ricardo Alarcon. One overwhelming impression was how organized Cuban society is to meet its people's needs. The organization is not just from the top down. It is also from the bottom up.

Before we knew it our busy week was coming to an end and we had to prepare to return to the US. There were meetings in which we discussed what to expect from US authorities. It is the position of the Pastors for Peace Caravan that any action by our government against our efforts to visit and bring humanitarian aid to Cuba is not only immoral, but illegal under the Constitution of the United States. On entering the United States we refused to answer any specific questions about our travel to Cuba apart from the questions we would be required to answer if we had traveled to any other country. It was a wonderful feeling to do this as a united group. As an individual, it is easy to feel intimidated when confronted by the power of the state, but we had become a group with a strong sense of solidarity. We knew that if the authorities attempted to victimize any of us, we were not alone. We really did experience ourselves as exercising our rights.

Now we are back in the US and are continuing our struggle against the government which is threatening to sanction us for our travel to Cuba. As we write we are witnessing the terrible images of poor people, the vast majority people of color, stranded and dying in New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, because of the neglect of the U.S. government. The death toll is now predicted to run into the thousands.

We are mindful that last September a Category 5 hurricane not unlike Katrina struck the island of Cuba. Over a million people were evacuated

before the storm hit, as well as equipment, animals, even refrigerators, and not a single Cuban died in this storm. Could there be any more glaring example of why we need to break this vicious and immoral blockade? For it is not only an economic blockade against the Cuban people, it is a blockade against the minds of the people of the United States preventing them from knowing that a different kind of society is possible – a society in which children, elderly and people of limited means are protected, and a world in which there is an understanding of our interdependence as human beings.

We have much to do here in the United States We have obtained a video tape of a previous caravan and a DVD about the Cuban five, "Mission Against Terror". We are arranging to share these as well as our experiences of Cuba with friends, neighbors, co-workers, local church groups, and student groups. It is a daunting task to counter the propaganda of the empire, but the example of Cuba is an inspiration and calls on our conscience to do whatever they can to contribute to this better world.

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