

Los Amigos, Cuban style

Alan Ray-Jones recalls a fascinating visit with Cuban Quakers



Welcome singing. | Photos: Alan Ray-Jones.

Cuban Quakers (*Cuaqueros*) sit in rows facing forwards in a building that may look very like a church. They not only have programmed meetings, but they sing. They sing a lot. 'We are Latins, we have to sing,' one said.

Travelling to Gibara

I was there in April 2010 with my wife, Elizabeth, in a party of about eighteen British Friends, including three from Scotland. This was not a random visit, but continued a tradition of occasional visits started by Marigold Best of Oxford in 1994, partly because Cuban Quakers were separated from the world by the regime. For example, ordinary Cubans were still not allowed internet access and couldn't go abroad (if they managed to get to another country they had to stay there). The fortnight we spent in Eastern Cuba was fascinating. It was my only first-hand experience of programmed Meetings for Worship – like those held by about eighty per cent of Friends worldwide. Ruth Homer, of Newton Abbot Meeting in Devon, a fluent Spanish speaker, led our party. She hopes to take another soon.

We flew from Gatwick to Havana on 14 April, and stayed in the basement of a (non-Quaker) church, with the clerk of Cuba Yearly Meeting as our host. We had time to look around the city before taking a smart new Chinese coach on 17 April to the Meeting at Gibara in Eastern Cuba. It is a quiet town that was badly damaged by a hurricane in 2008. The journey of about 400 miles gave us an opportunity to see the Cuban plain, with many palm trees and tropical plants. We spent the next two days looking round Gibara, both as a group and on our own, and had our first experience of a Cuban Meeting for Worship. Gibara was our base for the rest of our stay. During our time there we paid visits to the towns and Meeting Houses of Eastern Cuba and to two tourist enclaves, for a day on the beach and a special meal. I think we visited about six Meetings, introducing ourselves and learning about Cuban Friends, and also about life in Cuba, its health service and government. 26 April was a free day, and the following morning we set off for home, via Havana.

Doing things differently

Cuba Yearly Meeting was started by American evangelical Quakers who arrived on a banana boat early in 1901. The Meeting houses may look a bit like churches inside, but they don't have the stations of the cross, an altar or a font. I found some familiar pictures on the walls of the ones we visited, including Christ in the midst. Friends in Eastern Cuba may be evangelical Christians, but there is now a small silent Meeting in Havana as well, which was started by a Cuban Friend who had spent time in the UK. As individuals and church groups the *Amigos* seem very much as we hope we are – friendly, open and hospitable; a worshipping community with the same testimonies as us, to peace, truth, equality and simplicity. It is the testimonies that join us, not the manner of worship.

The first question any British Friend will probably ask is: 'Can they really be Quakers?' Nancy Irving, who has just stepped down as general secretary of FWCC, reflected in *the Friend* (23 March 2012) about her past prejudice and her first encounter with evangelical Friends in America. She wrote: 'I found I couldn't tell who was evangelical and who was unprogrammed. That was a revelation.' So it seems to be in Cuba too, though, sadly, my lack of Spanish made conversation difficult. Quakers there are certainly poor, as most Cubans are, and in view of that, their hospitality was astonishing.

Some differences between Meetings in Cuba and Meetings in Britain were very evident: they have many children and teenagers, and we were told that the children sometimes discover the Meeting first, and bring their parents. There were many family groups, and the numbers seemed impressive for small places: more than forty at Puerto Padre, twenty-five at a much smaller place. The programme for each individual Meeting for Worship can include singing, instrumental music, acting, readings, talks and a sermon. It is planned in advance by (say) one or two members of the Meeting, who may change frequently and may be of almost any age. Meetings have young 'pastors' who live at or near their Meeting house cost free. They are paid a small amount and their principal role involves pastoral care (oversight) as directed by the elders. They help with Meetings for Worship, too, when asked. On weekdays they help with Quaker community meetings of one sort or another (such as singing practice, children or community welfare).

I have wondered, since that visit, why it is that poor Cuban Meetings frequently have some paid, and obviously useful, help whereas much wealthier British Meetings do not.



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Revitalisation

Here is a short account of one Meeting for Worship, from my diary:

After breakfast we went in the coach to normal Sunday Meeting for Worship at Holguin. New this time was a scene acted out on stage by the children, which included a stabbing! There was also a sermon, including Bible readings (Doubting Thomas) and how we must make our own peace with God before we can spread peace in the world. There were hymns, with the words projected on a screen hung from the ceiling, and the sound of our singing must have reached all the passers-by through the open windows. At the end the church's singing group of eight voices sang the Jubilate Deo, in harmony, very well indeed.

On this occasion, at least, silence was in short supply. Our visit to Cuba left me wondering, not for the first time, why Meeting for Worship developed so differently in the continents on either side of the pond, where, if anywhere, this is explained, and whether each might now have something to learn from the other.

In 'About Quakers' on the FWCC website I read, 'Friends United Meeting (FUM) grew out of the westward migration and a consequent revitalization of Quakers, with Meetings developing programmed worship and releasing a Friend to serve as pastor.' This is still the pattern in Cuba – but why should revitalization have included programmed Meetings? More importantly, are Cuban innovative programmed Meetings like the US ones, and do they answer the question we often ask ourselves: why, when we think that our understanding of what is important in life is shared by many, don't our Meetings grow faster?

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