



Cuba Trip Fall 2017

My first journey to Cuba as an official ACTION missionary

Week 2

Thursday, September 28, 2017

This morning I got caught oversleeping (I wasn't sleeping, I was praying). Alternan knocked on my door and said, "Are you ready? We're leaving at eight!" I quickly jumped into my pants, put on a t-shirt and put my new glasses on (which I'm still getting used to and hardly ever use). I went over to Alter and I think I startled him. I asked, "Did you tell me about this last night?" He said, "Yes, of course!" "I don't remember," I responded. "Do I have time for a shower?" "Yes, we'll also have a little breakfast," he said. "I'll be ready in ten minutes (more like 20)."



A Ride in the Country

I came to find out after my stupor that we were going to another pastor's place to help him with his proposal. I thought we were going to see people affected by the hurricane. But this turned out to be a great trip. Our destination was actually only about 50 km away, but it took us nearly two hours to get there. Alter's Lada (a Russian-made car) is built like a tank. Good thing, too, because

I've never seen as many potholes since my first trip to Las Tunas last year. We went past Virtiendes where I saw a reconstituted sugar mill or "ingenio" brought back to life by an American company. The closer we got to our destination, the worse the roads became. After a while, the word remote lost its meaning for me. And to think that the pastor we were visiting comes fairly often to Camaguey from where we started. And he doesn't have even a Lada.



We spent the morning guiding the pastor and showing him a critique of his proposal. We inspected the site, then we went to a church member's house and ate a wonderful meal. Finally, we went back home. I failed to mention that we had a presbyter with us who happened to own a Ural motorcycle with a sidecar. When we dropped him off, I got to sit on this Russian-made vehicle which is so well known for its durability.



The older boy is the little blonde's uncle. Cuba is truly and naturally diverse.

Friday, September 29, 2017

Today I got up early to hitch a ride with an American Rotary group from Dallas, Texas visiting Cuba to help Carlos Alamedo's church with rewiring camp buildings near the church in Cespedes. This is the church that has an extensive sports ministry with whom I may



organize a short-term mission with folks in the states. Alternan drove me to meet the group at their hotel in Camaguey. My intention was to ride in the Rotarians' bus to the church, talk with the pastor and those in charge of sports ministry in Cespedes and then return home in late afternoon. The town of Cespedes is about 30 miles from Camaguey where I am staying. However, as many things happen in Cuba requiring much flexibility, the man in charge of showing me around had to attend to the needs of the larger group. He had to acquire the food and other supplies needed for the day.

He left me on my own and I naturally gravitated to helping with the project. I was delighted to be of some help. I met so many wonderful people, and we bonded as we worked together. We worked very hard tearing out old wiring and running the new cables with a new circuit. One of the Rotarians, a woman named Carmen, was a trained electrician in the US. She took charge of the project and was very knowledgeable. It was a tremendous opportunity to be of service and learn about the Rotary Club. As it turned out, we worked until about 5:30 pm and then stayed for a "Cuban night" of celebration with Cuban music, roast pig and great camaraderie. I finally did get to see Carlos that night and handed him a copy of Oración Radical. He was very appreciative and seemed quite interested in reading it, especially now as he faces some difficult times.

Saturday, September 30, 2017

I didn't get back until about 10 pm. On the way home I found out I could not even call because my minutes on my phone were used up. I looked on my GPS app and found out where to have the driver drop me off. I walked about a mile to Casa Esperanza. Alternan was surprisingly composed when I came in...not much rattles him. He did admit he was a bit worried when he didn't hear from me. But he also assured me he had the confidence that I was in good hands, and that I could find my way home on my own. I felt good about that.

Sunday, October 1, 2017

Today started out slow. I had breakfast with the visiting team and had a great conversation with one of them who had taken the Perspectives class. After that I helped clean up and went to recharge my phone and get on wifi at the park. I FaceTimed with my daughter who was at the Farmer's Market in Madison. It was fun. Later we will be visiting Arelis' (Alternan's wife) father who is in the hospital with bone cancer.

Earlier, (7:00 am) I woke up to a phone call from Alexander Roque who is the head of a sports ministry called MADEM. He wanted to say that there was a change in plans from a meeting on Monday to the possibility of meeting today. Naturally, I said OK. Things like this happen very often in Cuba. You have to remain open to schedule changes due to the difficulty of transportation and many other factors. I got up, took a shower and waited for him. In the meantime, I helped with a few bits of laundry, rearranging the furniture in the rooms and helped set the table for breakfast. I wasn't sure when I should eat. I wanted to wait for the men whom I was expecting. I finally received a text from Alex saying they would arrive at about 12:30. So I decided to continue helping with laundry.

The visiting team from Missouri was leaving at that time, and so we said our goodbyes and exchanged contact information. I plan on going to see them sometime when I go visit my brother in Hollister next summer. Then Brian came with Pastor Harpell and we sat down at breakfast together.

Over breakfast we spoke about many things. The pastor seemed especially interested in my background and how I became a missionary. We also spoke about his son who is in army special

forces. Pastor Harpell is in a hurry to get home because his daughter is having her first baby. After breakfast, he and Brian went to the local wifi park to check on things back home.

While I waited for the guys I did some laundry and then did some writing. I also wanted to go to the wifi park, but, again, I hesitated because I didn't know when the guys I was waiting for would come. Finally they did show up about 45 minutes later.

I spent about a half-hour with them and then Arelis called us for lunch. She was kind enough to include them at the last minute. This is a typical thing done in Cuba. No matter what your circumstances, you offer the hospitality of a meal (or at the very least a cup of "cafecito") if the visit is around the time of a meal or "merienda" (snack time).

At lunch, Brian and Pastor Harpell joined us and we had a tremendous time with Alex and Lazaro describing their ministry. They struck a chord with the pastor because of his love for sports. He plays hockey twice a week and is quite active. We kept



touching on points of connection such as how sports ministry can attract more men to church. The pastor said, "If I want more men to attend services and become part of the life of the church, I invite them to participate in construction projects or a motorcycle blessing or something else that clicks with them that's not choir or a sharing group." I soaked all this in as I thought about my future ministry in Cuba. I definitely would like a more balanced outreach that can reach heads of households and through them entire families and eventually communities.

Alex went on to talk for another four hours. The MADEM ministry seems expansive and comprehensive. I began to see why FCA had chosen them as their partner to work in Cuba. But I was honest with them about speaking with another sports ministry group. I had found out there was a split some time in the past. Alex and Dagoberto had worked together in the past, but were no longer collaborating. But both ministries and their leaders impressed me so much, I wanted to work with both of them. I began to think that I might be a catalyst for bringing them together again.

Alex seemed the most aggressive. He was passionate about what he was doing, but a bit long-winded. Lazaro impressed me as the more spiritual of the two. Lazaro was very soft-spoken, and I sensed he had the wisdom of experience. He had served as a missionary to Colombia where he was attacked by drug traffickers because he was so effective reaching the kids who were the target of their corrupting influence. He was beaten severely and had to receive stitches on his head for his injuries. Suffering like that for Christ has a way of making you deeply tuned in to what God wants for your life, even if it is perhaps ending it.

Monday, October 2, 2017

David Gomero arrived early this morning. I was very happy to see him. We had breakfast with Brian and we all were set to go to the wifi park when Nelson arrived with a pleasant surprise. It was Alexandria from Texas who was the guide for the Rotary group I had worked with a few days before. We sat and talked with both of them for a while. The Nelson got a phone call from a church staff member who was accompanying the rest of the group on a tour of Camaguey. One of the Rotarians had her purse snatched right from the bicycle taxi while she stepped away to take a photo. She lost \$60, but fortunately her passport was not inside the purse. This was a reminder of how important it is to not provide an unnecessary temptation to some Cubans who feel economic pressure and perhaps even justified in redistributing your wealth.

The rest of the day was spent sharing with Brian and David, both at the wifi park and back at the house. Brian received an email from another of our Cuban missionaries that his laptop and phone were stolen from the van the team was using. Again, this was an unfortunate reminder of some of the risks everyone faces in this

context of high material need and low moral development. This day would continue to bring more bad news as time went by.

At the wifi park, I told David to try FaceTime on his older iPhone and it worked. He called a very good friend of his who happens to live in Madison, WI. I talked with him a while and David said he would give me his contact information. I will definitely look him up when I get back.

Later that evening, everyone decided we would go out to dinner at local Paladar, which is a privately-owned restaurant as opposed to a state-owned establishment. Food in restaurants in Cuba is a hit-and-miss affair. You can never expect the same quality of food as in the States. But this was not too bad for Cuban standards.

We walked less than a mile to the place. But on the way we were again surprised to see the Rotarian group. Some were asking in front of us for a bit before we realized who they were. The rest of the group was in their air-conditioned bus nearby. I told Nelson I wanted to go say hello again. I didn't think I would have this opportunity. I told them how happy I was that we could say goodbye more properly and I heard several say "God bless you," as I stepped off the bus.

After dinner we went to another beautiful park in the center of the city to catch up on the outside world. We found out to our dismay about the horrible shooting in Las Vegas. This was around 10 pm, and we hoped it would be the last of the bad news for one day. I had a few minutes left on my internet account and was finally able to FaceTime with my son, Paul, and his family. The twin boys were already asleep, but I was able to see my eldest granddaughter, Isabella. I am very thankful for the wonder of technology that allows me this fun time with family across the miles.

I will be going to the dentist here in Camaguey. This is something I preferred to avoid if I had some control over it. But suddenly last Sunday (in the middle of a church service) I felt a big, hard lump sloshing around in my mouth. I had been chewing gum, and apparently a crown dislodged from a back molar. I discreetly put it in my shirt pocket and pretended like nothing happened. I've been trying to ignore it, postponing the inevitable. There is no pain, so I've been able to chew on one side and it has not really affected me much. But it does need to be fixed. I told Alternan

about it, and it appears he discussed this with Oto who made some inquiries for me. This morning, Alternan announced that I had an appointment for 8:00 am tomorrow. It seems like there is “more exclusive choice” of health care and dental care available for those who can pay. Keep tuned for my report next week on my experience with dental care in Cuba.