

CCG Cuba Mission Trip Report November 8-15, 2022

Participants:

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James Knight Dick Schulze
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November 8: Early departure from LGA. We managed to check 15 items, including two gigantic tubs containing a water purification system and parts as well as a large printer, thanks to the intrepid Dick Schulze and two caring, creative American Airline staff who helped repackage (as in disguise!) these critical items.

We made it to Holguin with nine of us in one van and all our bags in an accompanying truck. After settling in to our “casas particulares,” we met for dinner at our usual local restaurant, 1910, joined by Father Gil, his wife, Minelis, and their two daughters, Melissa and Adrianna. How wonderful to be united after being apart for 2 1/2 years! We had hoped to unpack and sort through all the goods we brought, but the power went out so we did so the next day. We soon became accustomed to such daily outages, some scheduled, some not. We also noted that Father Gil’s family took every bit of everyone’s dinner leftovers home to share. Life, clearly, has become much harder since our last visit in 2020.

November 9: Unpacked and sorted the hundreds of goods we brought—from children’s vitamins, Tylenol and toothpaste to prescription glasses, backpacks and a cataract surgery kit. Some went with us to Santiago, some to Gil’s other parish church in Manati and the rest to be allocated by Gil to his San Marcos congregants.

Then off to Gibara (one hour drive), once a flourishing port city and now an arts center with beautiful sea views and an old Spanish look-out fort. We visited the home of world-renowned musician and singer Manuel Galván whose nephew played and sang for us. Music is the soul of Cuban culture and we enjoyed combos playing and people dancing wherever we went.

November 10-12: We visited Santiago, a 2 ½ rollercoaster of a bus ride from Holguin. En route, we saw miles of incredibly fertile land, but minimal crops, crumbling sugar cane mills and only one rusted tractor. Old plows pulled by mules or horses, as if from another century, were the norm.

The oldest city in Cuba and the original capital (1520), Santiago has a tropical feel, with the Atlantic on one side and the Caribbean on the other. Its bustling vibe and hilly terrain are reminiscent of San Francisco.

We spent a lot of time at San Lucas, one of the three episcopal churches in Santiago. San Lucas was established in 1905 and still has its own church kindergarten, one of the few non-government ones left in the country. No new churches have been allowed in Cuba since the 1961 revolution, as Father Halbert of San Lucas explained to us. San Marcos, like most episcopal parishes, is a “worship house,” a concession granted by the government which is strictly monitored and controlled.

San Lucas was packed with 75-100 people for the Wednesday evening service which we attended. The power went out, but Marek managed to stand in the aisle in the near dark and give a homily in Spanish based on Matthew 25: 35-40: “For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” These people really live out those words! And they give and share out of scarcity, whereas we do so out of abundance. That’s a different level of gospel living!

We then gathered outside for a dinner with the San Lucas parishioners, funded by our group, and, like a miracle, the lights came back on just as we all sat down. When I helped clear plates to the kitchen, I saw every scrap of food, even chicken bones, being saved and repackaged for the parishioners to take home for another meal. Food shortages are now the norm here.

We also visited several historic sites here, including the Jesuit High School attended by Fidel Castro and his brothers, Raphael and Raul, the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery where Castro is buried under an unadorned stone inscribed simply “Fidel,” and the Parque San Juan, site of the famous 1898 charge of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders during the Spanish American War.

But, most memorable of all, was a fantastic choral concert by the local “Coro Madrigalista” (Madrigal Chorus), a group of 40+ young male and female performers. Squeezed into a small circular room, blocked by pillars in the center, with open windows and doors, motorcycle backfiring, people shouting and dogs barking, they sang their hearts out. The words of their opening song, a spiritual in memory of Martin Luther King, sung with such conviction by the soloist, Diony, still reverberates: “Let your dreams be realized!” So much despair in Cuba, yet there are also glimmers of hope.

November 12

In the morning, we visited the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, dedicated to the Virgin of Charity, the patron saint of Cuba, and the country’s only basilica. Legends abound about this pilgrimage church. In 1801, the King of Spain freed the Cuban slaves in the adjacent copper mines and they attributed their freedom to the power of a Virgin of Charity statue first discovered back in the 1600s.

Returned to Holguin in total darkness and driving rain. Dinner with some members of San Marcos.

November 13

We attended Mass, officiated by Gil and Marek, at San Marcos. Adriana Riles, one of our travelers, read one of the lessons beautifully in Spanish. So wonderful to celebrate our first service in San Marcos's new home! More than 25 congregants joined us. The number varies, according to Gil, since people have to struggle to find food which takes time and energy and some also some need transportation to get to the church. Everyone stayed afterwards for a lunch provided by us which was hugely appreciated. The new San Marcos site, unlike their previous home, now has the space both to expand the congregation as well as to have additional services, group meals, gatherings, events, etc.

We also visited Maria Toledo in her home where San Marcos held services for decades prior to moving to the new site. We remembered attending church there during our last two visits with people crammed into her living room with some standing in the doorway and sitting on the stairs. Maria has cancer, but cannot get a diagnosis because the hospital's only cat scan machine is broken. While Cuba has many highly trained medical professionals, they are handicapped by the dearth of medications, surgical supplies and machinery parts.

We then visited the former San Marcos Rectory next door where Gil and his family used to live. They moved to the new site to protect it from potential squatters as well as to better manage the ongoing site renovations. The former rectory has been partly renovated and has a nearly finished kitchen and bathroom as well as three bedrooms. Gil will be meeting with Bishop Griselda to discuss the future of this property. Options include converting it into a guest house or selling it and using the funds to continue renovating the new San Marcos site.

That same afternoon, we strolled around Holguin with Gil and had time for relaxed conversation both with him and among ourselves. Nice to be on foot rather than in a bus for a change! Our next trip should allow more unstructured time to spend just among ourselves as well as with Gil

November 14

We had an early morning departure to one of the area's most celebrated beaches: Guardalavaca, about an hour from Holguin. We also visited Bariay National Park, the site of Columbus's first landing in Cuba, which commemorates that early encounter of Spanish and local cultures. Then back to Holguin to pack and prepare for our departure.

November 15

As we had an afternoon departure, we were able to spend the entire morning with Gil to discuss everything from the current state of Cuba to San Marcos finances and future plans.

The Cuban economy is in free fall, according to Gil, with no improvement in sight. There is seldom any meat in the state stores and often shortages of basic foods. Even if available, the cost is prohibitive and even higher on the "private" market. For example, Episcopal clergy are

paid the equivalent of \$45 monthly. Two dozen eggs cost about \$8. Clearly, food security has become the number one problem facing the ECC.

In advance of our trip, Dick wired \$5000 to Gil via our Anglican connection in Canada. While U.S. dollars are no longer accepted by Cuban banks, euros still are accepted. Those funds paid for our community meals both in Holguin and Santiago as well as provided \$300 for San Marcos's parish Christmas dinner, part of Bishop Griselda's "Project Feliz Navidad" intended to fund a Christmas meal in each of the ECC's 54 church communities. That number has increased from 46 in 2021 with some 20+ confirmed parishioners at each one, plus five new priests have been ordained in this past year. Clearly the Episcopal Church in Cuba, in spite of incredible odds, is growing and on the move!

We also carried \$20,000 in cash on behalf of the Friends of the Episcopal Church of Cuba (FECC) to supplement the reduced salaries (due to the Cuban currency revaluation and inflation) paid by the Cuban Diocese to its clergy and staff. Gil will transfer those funds to Bishop Griselda.

As for San Marcos, Gil is determined to press on with the renovation of the main room, now the sanctuary. Not only has the price of cement skyrocketed, but the one local cement factory has shut down. Out of the \$5000 (\$4775 after bank transfer fees) transmitted by Dick (expensed to each of us) in advance of our trip, \$1000 was given each to San Marcos and San Lucas for their parish meals after the Eucharist, \$1000 was given to San Marcos from the CCG Cuba account to match Marek's contribution from his discretionary fund and \$300 was given for the Feliz Navidad dinner at San Marcos. We all agreed to give Gil the remaining \$1475 to be used at his discretion for food, construction costs, etc.

Gil will develop a timeline and budget for each of his priorities as follows:

1. Renovate and enlarge the existing worship space.
2. Move the cement and other construction materials to the former rectory to provide more usable space at the current site.
3. Install the water filtration system in the room near the entrance.
4. Decide whether to renovate the old rectory or sell it as is.

While staying at La Casona, one of our "casas particulares" in Holguin, we learned that the owner was in Mexico purchasing a generator. Marek asked Gil if he could use one, given the constant power outages. Clearly, Gil agreed! We then decided to give \$700 to purchase the generator which the owner also agreed to help install at San Marcos. Great parting gift!

We then set off to the airport where both check-in and security kept shutting down because of power outages. But we finally got cleared for take-off. Homeward bound!

Angenette Meaney
December 11, 2022

How to Grow the CCG-San Marcos Companion Relationship

1. CCG Youth Trip

Discuss with Marek ASAP and, if feasible, send both Cheryl and Josh to Holguin in early 2023 to explore possible venues, accommodations, itinerary and timing. Goal: Have 4-5 CCG youth join the annual youth summer camp in Holguin. Also hope to involve James Knight in the planning and execution of said trip.

2. Food Security

Food shortages are the number one challenge confronting both San Marcos and Cuba at large. Most immediately, we should investigate the cost and feasibility of getting food to San Marcos via **Katapulk.com** which has been used successfully by Pat Cage and the Friends of the Episcopal Church of Cuba (FECC). Also consider fundraisers for food tied into World Hunger Day, Thanksgiving, etc.

3. Length of Visits

We need to shorten our mission trips to attract more participants, (especially young/working people) to lighten the load on Father Gil and Minelis as well as to control the trip cost (about \$1200 per person, including gifts made to San Marcos, plus airfare). For example, a group could leave on a Thursday or Friday, spend the week-end in Holguin, visit Santiago or another city and return on Wednesday. We could also consider shorter, more frequent trips, such as Thursday-Monday to bring funds/supplies and focus on San Marcos. Every 2-3 years, we could offer a longer trip depending on interest. More Spanish-speaking visitors recommended!

4. Allocate more time with San Marco congregants

Encourage smaller scale, direct, personal contact between us and them.

Organize smaller, more informal group meals, outings, activities, such as a picnic, children's activities such as art, candle rolling and seed planting projects. To learn more about the realities of daily life, go food shopping with San Marcos parishioners.

5. Review list of needed items

We should reevaluate and prioritize the volume and range of the items we bring. Focus on more essential goods, such as antibiotics and other critical needs. Start preparation three months before departure. Also bring more personal gifts for our hosts. And we should publicize what we are plan to bring via our Sunday worship leaflet and CCG E-News graphics (number of donated toothbrushes, kids' vitamins, pain relievers, etc.) and photos to keep San Marcos top of mind.

6.CCG Father Gil Visit

Gil is a powerful preacher and articulate English speaker. A visit from him would put a human face on our companion relationship with San Marcos and would certainly generate more interest and support by our congregation. Other ECC ministers have visited the U.S. so getting a visa is possible. We would need to clear this idea with Bishop Griselda, but should sound her out soon as she is retiring and the visa process will likely be complicated.

7. Change San Marcos Building Ownership

Because of Cuban restrictions on churches owning property, the new San Marcos home is currently owned in the name of Minelis, Father Gil's wife, and the former rectory is owned by Father Gil. To ensure that the Episcopal Church of Cuba (ECC) continues to benefit from these two properties it purchased, we strongly recommended that Gil and Minelis leave both properties to the ECC in their respective wills. As neither of them has a will, Gil agreed and said he would arrange for both of them to write wills and register them

8. New CCG Leadership

Angenette, Bob and Dick need to step down from chairing this effort. It's time for younger people with new ideas to take the reins!

Angenette Meaney
December 17, 2022