

## MORAVIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

HOME AND OVERSEAS

FEBRUARY 2016

### Women's World Day of Prayer Service on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2016 (written by the Christian women of Cuba)

There may be some of you who have had the opportunity to have visited Cuba, but for the majority the island may remain something of an enigma, despite the focus on it in the news just last year. There have been so many times in the past that the country preparing our World Day of Prayer material has then been in the headlines and our prayer focus therefore even more important.

#### What we know about Cuba - and what we might *think* we know.....

Although we think of Cuba as one large island, in reality it consists of numerous other small islands, cays (pronounced 'keys') and islets of various sorts, including many that are covered only by mangrove. It has a total area of approximately 43,000 square miles, slightly smaller than England. It's the largest Caribbean island, located at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico and therefore called 'the key of the Gulf', with the United States only 93 miles to the north, the Bahamas to the northeast, Mexico to the west, Jamaica to the south and Haiti to the southeast. Cuba has a population of just over 11 million, of which about 2 million live in the capital of Havana. The climate is warm, humid and subtropical with an average temperature of 25.5°C but the country is also prone to hurricanes because of its location.



Cuba's national flag shows 3 blue stripes to represent the three departments into which colonial Cuba was divided; the 2 white bands stand for purity of the patriotic cause; the triangle stands for equality, strength and constancy and the colour red represents the blood shed in the struggle for independence. The white star represents independence and freedom. It was first flown in 1850 at the start of the War of Independence.

Like many of the other Caribbean islands, Cuba has had a history of hardship under Spanish colonisers, slavery and piracy, and this past led up to the conflict known as the 'war of Independence' as they struggled to free themselves from Spanish control. The end of this war was mediated by the government of the United States and in 1902 the Republic of Cuba was constituted, under the conditions of the Platt Amendment which gave the United States the right to intervene in the internal matters of the Island whenever they thought it necessary. This right was repealed in 1934, but the US maintained its rights over the **Guantanamo Naval Base**, which we have all heard and read about in more recent times.

Another name we all recognise is that of **Fidel Castro**.

In the 1950s a dictatorship devastated Cuban society and poverty was widespread. Under the leadership of Fidel Castro and others, such as **Ché Guevara**, a new movement started known as 'the national liberation war'. It was this revolution, supported by the communist bloc, which culminated in the overthrow of the dictatorship and brought enormous benefits to the most disadvantaged in Cuban society. Education and health services were provided, illiteracy was eliminated and large companies and foreign monopolies were divided amongst the workers.

But with all the benefits came the breakdown both in relations with the US, resulting in the trade embargo, and in diplomatic relations when Cuba elected its first democratic socialist government.

The fall of the communist bloc put Cuba in a deep crisis. She lost the help received in important areas such as food, fuel and medicines. This is the time Cubans refer to as 'the special period', when Christian organisations in the US have provided humanitarian aid to Cubans and attempted to dispel the common myths portrayed by the US media and make American citizens more aware of the reality of life in Cuba.

### **The challenges of the present time and hopes for the future:**

A year ago both governments, under President Raul Castro and Barak Obama announced the re-establishment of diplomatic relations after 55 years and only recently we heard on the news of the opening of the US embassy in Havana. But following this announcement there is a long way to go to improve the lot for many Cubans. Almost everyone is denied access to the internet, most people take home pay of around \$20 a month and food is still rationed. The beautiful grand architecture around Havana is dilapidated and crumbling and life in the rural areas is tough with a lack of any modern machinery, whilst the limited housing and shortages for families cause much discontent and hardship.

There is great hope for the future and the potential for increasing tourism is vast. Because of its separation in recent history, Cuba has maintained a character different from all the other Caribbean islands and, as the sanctions go there are those that worry they will “succumb to the march of McDonald’s, KFC, Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts” and lose more than they will gain.

In his recent visit to Cuba, Pope Francis called for a “revolution of tenderness” and praised past generations of Cubans for keeping the catholic flame alive through years of repression of the faith. Many congregations had survived thanks to the women who had taken up positions of leadership when their pastors or priests had been conscripted or emigrated, and today women have many high-level roles. There are now over 60 denominations of Protestant and Orthodox churches, with a popular acceptance of Afro-Cuban churches, Judaism and Spiritualism.

As well as in the Church, women occupy many posts traditionally assigned to men and make up 68% of technically and professionally qualified positions. Cuba is 4<sup>th</sup> in the world of countries with the most women in their parliament.

### **Perhaps some things we do not know...**

“Nothing is more important than a child” is a very popular phrase in Cuba. They are guaranteed free education and free health care. Cuba was the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Children’s Day is celebrated throughout the country with parties in the parks and churches. Cuba has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world and has the most doctors per inhabitant – one for every 133 people, sending doctors and specialists offering humanitarian aid where no doctor has ever been before.

It is no surprise then that the theme for this year’s service is **“Receive Children, Receive Me”**. With the material there are activities and resources for Children as well as a Children’s Service. I encourage you all to make use of these in your Sunday School, Messy Church, Café Church or even take into school. This year we are praying for the women *and* children of Cuba with Christ’s words urging us to “Let the little children come to me”, but also remembering the words from Galatians 3:26:

‘In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.’

Wendy Hopcroft

