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Presbyterian Church USA: Committee recommends that Assembly take action to restore relationship with Cuba

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After several hours of public hearings and debate, the 221st General Assembly (2014)'s Committee on Peacemaking and International Issues voted to ask the Assembly to call on the United States government to lift all travel restrictions and remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Ever since Cuba's revolution and Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959, a general blockade has cut off ties between Cuba and the United States. With contact shut off, Cuba became, in the minds of many U.S. citizens, a homogenous enemy to the south. Three overtures before the Assembly are now seeking to transform that impression.

William Metcalf, a ruling elder in the Presbytery of Southeastern Illinois, reminded commissioners during open hearings that when ties were severed, they were also severed with partner churches, including the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba, founded through the witness of U.S Presbyterians.

This was our "daughter church," he said. It wasn't until 1986 when the PC(USA) authorized a partnership in mission—and when the U.S. government began issuing one-time special travel licenses for religious purposes—that mission partnerships began to reform.

Currently, 15 PC(USA) presbyteries and synods and 90 congregations have formed mission ties with Cuban partners. Patricia Metcalf of First Presbyterian Church of Champaign, Illinois, described years of relationship and trust building. "Our conversations are open and sometimes hard-hitting," she said.

Verniece Goode, a member of Living Water for the World's Cuba Network, was quick to point out, however, that while the ban does permit religious travel, it is a constantly fragile, cumbersome and tenuous process. More importantly, she said, "the travel ban causes us to have to ask permission from the U.S. government to do God's work . . . compromising our religious freedom."

Presbyterians traveling to Cuba currently have to record every activity while in Cuba and hold onto these records for at least five years should the U.S. government demand them.

Some say the real issue, however, is the welfare of the Cuban people and their churches. "Cuba has suffered, and continues to suffer, trying to survive an unjust embargo continued from a Cold War now over," said Jose Casel, a U.S. citizen born in Cuba who served as a pastor in Cuba for 20 years and now is executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Tres Rios.

The Peacemaking Committee voted unanimously to remove all travel restrictions. Members were less confident, however, in removing Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The U.S. State Department currently includes four countries on that list: Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria. The State Department has already removed Libya and Iraq from the list.

Debate alternated between accusations that Cuba continues to sponsor terrorism and claims that while much human rights work remains to be done, Cuba's days of supporting terrorist and insurgency groups are over.

Particularly persuasive for many of the committee's members was Jesus Sanchez Reyes, whose Cuban parents emigrated to the United States after the revolution, right before giving birth to Reyes. Though Reyes is the committee's moderator and thus would not typically engage in the debate, he turned that role over to Vice Moderator Karen Breckenridge so he could speak and vote as a commissioner.

"Cuba does sponsor terrorism," Reyes said, referring to its alleged role in Venezuela. "Students are being murdered," he said, "and not by Venezuelan soldiers; they are Cuban soldiers."

"This comes directly from friends and fellow Presbyterians who are Venezuelans and have family members in Venezuela," Reyes said.

However, Maria Arroyo, Presbyterian World Mission area coordinator for Latin America, didn't agree. "I have been to Venezuela, and this is the first time I've heard of this rumor. There are many rumors that been unconfirmed. According to the U.S. State Department, this is not true."

In response to Reyes's statement, a commissioner proposed an amendment to soften the language, calling on the U.S. government simply to review and reconsider the place of Cuba on the list. Ultimately the committee voted down the amendment and voted 36 to 26 in favor of removing Cuba from the list.

The committee decided not to authorize a consultative process through the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to review the changes taking place in Cuba and reinforce partnerships. The decision was based mostly on financial implications.