

Bring Down the Wall in the Caribbean

A resolution in support of renewed diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba
*Approved by the 23-25 June 2016 United Church of Christ
Southern Conference annual meeting, Elon, North Carolina*

BACKGROUND

On some medieval maps, the phrase “Here be dragons” was written just beyond the boundary of known exploration. For nearly six decades this image has applied to U.S. citizens’ perceptions of Cuba.

Our incomprehension and enmity have developed because of: a partial trade embargo against Cuba announced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1960; the rupture in diplomatic relations in 1961, vividly symbolized by the shuttering of the U.S. and Cuban embassies in Havana and Washington, respectively; the imposition in 1962 of a total trade embargo by President John F. Kennedy; the passage by Congress and signing into law by President Bill Clinton of the Helms-Burton Act of 1998, the reversal of which requires both congressional and presidential agreement in a new law; all of which together have resulted in the effective blockading of information about our nearest overseas neighbor and constitute the last remaining vestige of the Cold War.¹

Clearly the time has come, indeed has long since passed, to tear down our own “Berlin Wall” in the Caribbean.

Thankfully, over the past year and a half, the dismantling of that barrier between the United States and Cuba has begun. Evidences of this thaw in bilateral relations include the joint announcements of 17 December 2014, made concurrently by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, of the restoration of full diplomatic relations; the removal of Cuba from the U.S. Department of State’s list of “state sponsors of terrorism”

on 29 May 29 2015; and the subsequent executive actions on the part of both governments to ease trade and travel restrictions.

BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING

Such transforming initiatives are especially encouraging for those of us formed by a biblical vision. Jesus' mandate to love enemies is more than sentiment. It included feeding them (Prov. 25:21; Rom. 12:20). Jesus went so far as to say that worship, the act of adoration, is dependent on the initiative of reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24). Indeed, the Apostle Paul considered the ministry of reconciliation to be at the heart of our calling (2 Cor. 5:18).

WHEREAS

Accordingly, the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ resolves as follows:

WHEREAS, the United Church of Christ (UCC) has previously urged this diplomatic renewal with resolutions in the General Synods of 1979 and 1993, and the General Council action of 1983; and

WHEREAS, on 10 March of this year UCC General Minister and President Rev. Dr. John C. Dorhauer co-signed a letter to President Barack Obama, with other Christian and Jewish leaders in the U.S., expressing support for the president's historic trip to Cuba in March 2016, for the reopening of the U.S. embassy in Havana, and for President Obama's executive actions easing some of the travel and trade restrictions; and

WHEREAS, respected international human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have long opposed the U.S. embargo of Cuba;

WHEREAS, every year since 1992 the United Nations General Assembly has overwhelmingly condemned the U.S. embargo of Cuba; and

WHEREAS, recent polling indicates that 73 percent of all U.S. citizens (including 59 percent of Republicans) favor ending the embargo;² and

WHEREAS, 53 percent of Cuban Americans, traditionally the Cuban government's most fervent critics, now favor ending the embargo, with only 31 percent wanting it continued;³ and

WHEREAS, the governments of the United States and Cuba have resumed formal diplomatic relations; President Obama has become the first sitting U.S. chief executive to visit Cuba in more than 80 years, and has used his constitutionally authorized executive prerogative to ease some trade and travel restrictions; and

WHEREAS, members of congregations belonging to the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ in recent years have initiated people-to-people connections between Christians here and in Cuba, resuming a legacy of border crossings led by Rev. Theodore Braun, a longtime UCC pastor who beginning in 1979 led 40 delegations of Christians from the U.S. for meetings with their sisters and brothers in Cuba;

BE IT RESOLVED

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the delegates to the 51st Annual Gathering of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ, meeting 23-25 June in Elon, N.C., give thanks to God for the progress made over the past year and a half by the governments of Cuba and the United States toward the normalizing of diplomatic and economic relations, and particularly applaud President Obama's initiative from the U.S. side in giving high priority to the same; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we applaud the initiatives of UCC congregations and others in developing friendships across the divide separating our countries, encourage additional delegations from our churches to visit Cuba, and to invite and host Cuban clergy and lay leaders to visit us, thereby strengthening our ties as sisters and brothers in Christ and mutually encouraging one another to pursue the consensus of public opinion in both countries needed to implement new political policies; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we encourage every level of Southern Conference life to give priority attention to the history of Cuba, of U.S.-Cuba relations, and the life of churches in Cuba; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we will continue to advocate for further U.S. administrative actions and congressional legislation in order to secure the full normalization of relations between our two countries, including the consideration and passage of current bills H.R. 664, The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act; H.R. 3238, The Cuba Trade Act of 2015; and H.R. 3687, The Cuba Agricultural Exports Act of 2015, and their companion bills in the U.S. Senate; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the UCC Southern Conference heartily supports honest and respectful negotiation between our governments to restore mutual dignity and to resolve political differences; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that Christians in the U.S. need to attend the testimony of our Cuban brothers and sisters. Due to political circumstances, for three generations the churches in Cuba have learned to live without access to social privilege, a status we have long assumed, compromising our understanding of the kind of authority granted under the Spirit's direction. "Not by might, nor by power,

but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6). We stand in need of being evangelized anew.

#

Written by Ken Sehested, founding co-pastor, Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, N.C., with assistance from Stan Hastey, Tom Warren, and Elmer Lavastida.

¹ For a summary history of U.S.-Cuban relations see https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba%E2%80%93United_States_relations.

² Growing Public Support for U.S. Ties With Cuba – And an End to the Trade Embargo," Pew Research Center, 21 July 2015 <http://www.people-press.org/2015/07/21/growing-public-support-for-u-s-ties-with-cuba-and-an-end-to-the-trade-embargo/>.

³ Bendixen & Amandi poll for the Miami Herald, 17 December 2015 <http://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article50333010.ece/binary/Read%20the%20full%20survey>.