



PEACE RIVER PRESBYTERY

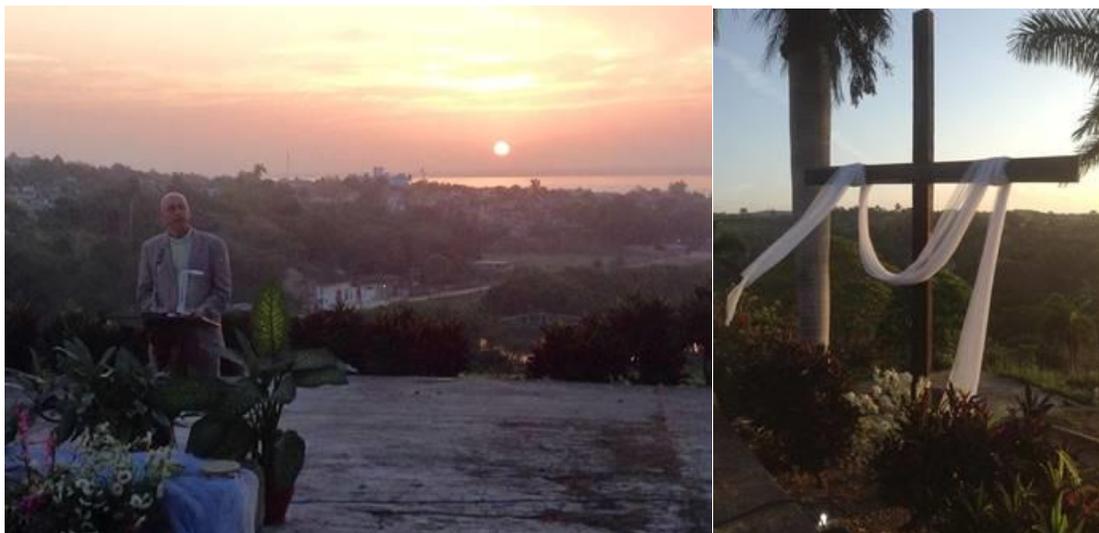


Weekly Presbytery Letter – March 30, 2016
Rev. Graham Hart, General Presbyter

[Cuba ... Easter ... Peace River Presbytery:](#) [Summary Observations and What's next?](#)

Six weeks ago, Winston Lawson, Clint Cottrell, and I returned from Cuba, having been invited, along with the three other presbyteries in south Florida, to meet with Presbyterian church leadership in Cuba. It was the first formal conversation between Presbyterians in south Florida and Cuba in 50 years. If you want to see a 20 minute [You-Tube picture video](#) of our time there, [click here](#) (our thanks to the I.T. folks at Tropical Florida Presbytery for putting this together).

Since our visit Cuba has been very much in the news with President Obama's visit, the Rolling Stones' concert, and new agreements between our two countries being announced - including daily scheduled flights from our area. I don't think it would be an over-statement to say that in Cuba, change is in the air and there is an Easter feeling. Here is a picture of an Easter Sunrise service at the Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas, where we had our meetings.



When we met with the leaders of the Cuban Church, they were incredibly honest, transparent, hopeful, and blunt. We all were both honored to be in these conversations, as well as humbled by what the Cuban Church has been able to do in spite of the limitations they have had to deal with these past 50 years. We came away realizing we have so much to learn from them.

What they are not interested in is a partnership that evolves into mission trips where we go, taking our paint brushes or some material things and engage in a 2-7-day project. What they want is a mutual partnership. Their resources, because of the U.S. embargo, as well as inefficiencies in their economy - which they freely talk about - are limited. However, mission trips that focus on material things is not what they desire. They want conversation, partnership, and learning together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, what's next in this exploratory conversation? Peace River's Steering Committee created a Cuba Partnership Task force that will meet over the next 18 months. We are looking for one or two additional members for the task force,

especially those with some Cuban connection. Please [email me](#) or [Kathleen Weller](#), if interested. At the April Presbytery meeting, Clint and Winston will be making a presentation.

Summary Observations - Since getting back I have been asked several times to talk about our time there and what I learned. Following are some of the bullet points of what I have shared. Each point is a 2 or 3-minute story. I am not an expert, but these are some impressions.

- **It's complicated.** There was not one person we met whose family has not been touched by the way global politics played out in their lives.
- **I came back realizing how much I don't know.** Much had changed in the past 25 years, especially the past 10, but my "narrative" and understanding of what is going on in Cuba pretty much stopped 50 years ago, and that old narrative still shapes much of our American view of what is going on in Cuba today.
- **The Cuban Church is resilient.** It has had to re-invent itself many times over. At the time of the revolution 300 member churches were left with 4 members and no pastor. They had to figure out how to be faithful during the early years and with many restrictions the government placed on them. How did they do it?
- **The Cuban Church today is vibrant, alive and growing.** I wasn't aware that they now have the ability to be the church without fear, and can express themselves and share their faith. In fact, the government is looking to the church to be involved in some of the social challenges in their society.
- **The Presbytery-Reformed Church leaders with whom we met with are hopeful, educated, spirit-filled, hard-working, and realistic.** They are good reformed Christians from whom we have much to learn!
- **There are members of the Parliament who are not members of the Communist Party,** including three Protestant Clergy. I met with one of them, thinking she was must a token, but came away amazed at the level of influence she and other non-communist party members have.
- **It is layered and complex; feelings are strong and complicated** between those who left 50 years ago and those who stayed. However, there is a new narrative being played out in Cuba today which is not the narrative that the first generation of Cuban political refugees want to lift up or talk about. Also, the 'next generation' in Cuba, and to some degree in the U.S. as well, have the desire to "get over it," and "get on with it" (i.e. building a new Cuba and a new set of relationships and expectations between our countries).
- **Cubans do not want to become dependent** on the U.S. or any country, nor do they want to lose their souls to materialism and greed, which they see as a problem with unfettered capitalism. However, they want to do better and have a better life for themselves and their children, many of whom are leaving Cuba in record numbers.
- **The Cuban people are incredibly well educated, proud, and do not want to lose what they see as important values, programs and gains of the past 50 years.** What they are clear about is that, while not everything about the revolution was good, as changes comes to Cuba they do not want to lose values such as: universal health care, good and free education for all, housing and transportation for all (note – there is relatively little homelessness in Cuba, and the pastors we met with were shocked when some of them have been to Miami to see the homeless population there).
- **Cubans, if they can afford it, have complete freedom to travel** wherever they want, and those who leave Cuba today seeking political asylum in the U.S. are not doing it for political reasons, but only economic (i.e. there were some long and painful conversations about that).
- **The embargo has had a tremendous impact,** and continues to limit hopes and dreams. Many think that the embargo has ended, but that is not true. One way we can help them is by encouraging our Congress to change some of the laws put in place 50 years ago, that from the perspective of the USA were justified then, but today

need to be looked again since we don't live in 1956 anymore. ([Click here for information about that and what you can do](#)).

- **The Cuban government has not always been effective or good.** There was a huge improvement in their freedoms 25 years ago when the Soviet Union collapsed (i.e. we had some fascinating conversations about how their socialist experiment succeeded and how it failed).



- **The real life stories** of people like: Nancy - Raul - and Ernesto (grandmother, son and grandson), each with deep wounds, dreams, and hopes; they are active Presbyterians in La Fernando, one of the new church developments in Havana. And Fefita, a 90-year-old retired Cuban Presbyterian Educator (see picture), whose PCUSA pension was not able to be sent to her for the past 50 years because of the U.S. embargo. (FYI – the Cuban Presbyterian Church was part of the old Synod of New Jersey until the revolution). When her story was recently told to a USA Senator, legislation was created so these retirement accounts of Cuban pastors and educators from 50 years ago could be unfrozen. When she received her pension as a lump sum, a major portion of it she gave to La Fernando which enabled them to recently purchase the property for their new church home. (Picture above is with the pastor of La Fernando in their new worship space).
- **WOW** – I am humbled, grateful for our time there, and know there is so much more for us to learn.

Living into Eastertide...

Christ is alive in Cuba and here...

Thanks be to God for the hope we have in Christ;

Graham

Graham Hart

General Presbyter

graham@peacriverpresbytery.org

IN MEMORY ...

In Memory of The Reverend R. Craig Countiss, Honorably Retired, former Stated Supply Pastor at First, Lehigh, former Pastor of Holy Trinity, and former, longtime Stated Clerk of Peace River Presbytery.

Craig died at Hope Hospice just before noon on Good Friday, March 25, 2016. Craig is survived by his wife, Liz and his daughter, Terry.

Members of Presbytery were able to visit with Craig over the past few weeks that he was hospitalized, to pray with him and encourage him. We have been in support of Liz at this time as well.

Now we trust him to our loving God, even as we celebrate the hope we have in Christ. As Liz shared with one of her caregivers, this would have been the first Easter that Craig did not preach, so we wonder what kind of Easter chorus he heard! That is our hope.

There will be a direct cremation, and when the date of the memorial service is determined we will inform the Presbytery.

Graham

Graham Hart
General Presbyter
Peace River Presbytery
(941) 426-8421

BETH-EL FARMWORKER MINISTRY, INC.

A Ministry to the Farmworkers in Wimauma

Summer will be here before you know it! Beth-El has numerous mission opportunities for adults and youth. From leading Vacation Bible School, to work groups helping out in our community, to scholarships for kids to go to camp at Cedarkirk, there are many ways your church can help support this valuable mission. Call Javier today at 813-633-1548 ext. 228, or email him at Javier@beth-el.org to learn more.

Open House:

April 17th 2-5pm

The mission of Beth-El is committed to supporting the farm working community and our neighbors in need through opportunities for hunger relief, education, healthcare, and spiritual growth.

During the open house, guests will have an opportunity to learn more about these initiatives as well as see many of the new renovations around our campus. There will also be bus tours of the local community so that visitors can gain a first hand glimpse of the challenges many of our farmworkers face. For more information, please call us at 813-633-1548.

Summer Employment Opportunity:

Beth-El is looking for an older teen or adult to lead the summer youth activities.

The position will lead all youth activities; serve as a liaison with Cedarkirk for our scholarship program, and assist the operations manager in coordinating incoming mission teams. A valid driver's license is required. For more information, or to apply, please contact Beth-El at info@beth-el.org.

Kathy

Kathleen Dain
Executive Director

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[www.beth-el.org](http://www.beth-el.org)  
[March Newsletter](#)

## **CEDARKIRK CAMP & CONFERENCE CENTER**

*A place apart to build up the body of Christ in love.*

[www.cedarkirk.org](http://www.cedarkirk.org)

**Summer is coming soon!** It is hard to believe, but summer camp preparations are already underway. This summer's theme, FEARLESS FAITH, will help campers focus on how they become part of, gain support from, and build their own

Christ-centered communities. By looking at leaders from the Bible who used communities given to them by God, campers will be empowered to draw courage from friends, family, and community, stand up to injustice and help change attitudes, forgive others, and connect to and welcome all people. Please help Cedarkirk by letting the children and youth of your church or community know about the unique opportunities available this summer. We are also looking for volunteer nurses and worship leaders for the week-long sessions.

If you have any questions, please contact the camp office at (813) 685-4224 or visit [www.cedarkirk.org](http://www.cedarkirk.org).

## **MISION PENIEL**

*A Ministry of Peace River Presbytery to the Farmworkers in Immokalee*

The Mision Peniel Task Force continues to meet and build the support and structure for continuing this vital ministry.

If you want to make a donation to support this recovery effort you may send the check (marked *Mision Peniel*) to:  
Peace River Presbytery | 5600 Peace River Rd. | North Port, FL. 34287

- Collection Centers for Mision Peniel Supplies ([click for information](#))
- Critical Needs List ([click for information](#))

## **RELIGION IN THE NEWS – ARTICLES THAT HAVE COME ACROSS MY DESK OR BEEN SENT TO ME (Graham):**

### [An Easter Sunday suicide bombing shows plight of Pakistan's Christians](#)

The Washington Post: While most Christians and Muslims still coexist without incident in Pakistan, there has been a growing sense of concern among the nation's Christian community.

### [Rejoice! Why that circus in the aisle could bring new life to your church](#)

The (London) Guardian: The Church of England has nearly 16,000 buildings, but they are empty most of the time. With their maintenance now an urgent issue, radical reinvention may be required.

[Easter, Jesus and the death of conventional wisdom](#) (Fox News) Michael Guillen.... co-author of the brave new physics, reportedly said, ... For that reason, this Easter Christians can feel confident ...

### [Are the pews half empty or half full? Lessons from 734 A.D.](#)

Religion Dispatches: Clerical grouching over empty pews has been happening -- off and on -- for a very long time.

### [It's not important if the Bible is true. What matters is that it's real.](#)

The Washington Post: Historically, Christians have been skeptical of literal readings of scripture.

### [The greatest story never told](#)

National Catholic Reporter: Sadly, our Christian "story" makes less and less sense to people of our time. Is there a way that it can become captivating again?

### [Governor rejects a religious-freedom bill](#)

The Atlantic: Nathan Deal sides with corporations and gay-rights advocates who objected to the legislation backed by conservative evangelicals.

Religion Dispatches: [Is religious liberty whatever anyone says it is?](#)

### [Americans see immigrants more favorably than do Trump, Cruz](#)

Religion News Service: The 2016 Republican presidential campaign boils with anti-immigrant rhetoric but candidates' harsh proposals don't resonate with most Americans, particularly religious believers and young adults.

### [The most important role of denominations in church planting](#)

Christianity Today: Ed Stetzer on how to focus on church planting from the national level.

### [The nuns of Harlem](#)

The New York Times: The 14 sisters of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary make up one of only three predominantly black orders in the country.

## **EVENTS AROUND THE PRESBYTERY**

The following are hosted by Peace River churches and are open to all:

[Intensive Journal Workshop at Pine Shores Presbyterian](#)

April 8-11, 2016

## **EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

The following are position openings in PRP churches.

Click on the title for more information.

[Part-Time Employment Positions](#) – Chapel By The Sea, Fort Myers Beach

[Part-Time Bookkeeper / Accounting Clerk](#) – Northminster Presbyterian Church, Sarasota

### **PRAYER NEEDS:**

#### **Please continue to pray for:**

- Mrs. Liz Countiss – Rev. Craig Countiss passed away on Good Friday, March 25 (see announcement earlier in this newsletter). Pray for comfort and peace for Liz.
- The family and other loved ones of Ruling Elder Phyllis Maisel, of Northminster P.C., who passed away on March 16. Phyllis was very active in the Presbytery.
- Jim Beckwith - health
- Rev. Dr. Kathleen Weller – healing of broken arm
- Rev. Dr. Margaret Towner – recovery from hip revision surgery
- Robert Dennis, Son of Rev. India Dennis – mental health issues
- Greg Beckwith (son of Jim and Becky Beckwith) – on kidney transplant list
- Grandson of Tim and Martha Halverson - suffering from a rare autoimmune disease
- Beth-El Farmworker Ministry
- Misión Peniel
- Cedarkirk Camp and Conference Center
- Dan and Elizabeth Turk, PCUSA Mission Co-Workers in Madagascar
- Les and Cindy Morgan, PCUSA Mission Co-Workers in Bangladesh

## **CHURCH PRAYER GUIDE: APRIL 2016:**

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|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| April 3  | <u>Christ Church of Longboat Key</u><br>Stated Supply Pastor: Rev. Dr. Norman Pritchard<br>Email: <a href="mailto:revnmp@comcast.net">revnmp@comcast.net</a>                                                                                                                                           |
| April 10 | <u>First Presbyterian Church, Naples</u><br>Pastor: Rev. Craig Goodrich<br>Email: <a href="mailto:PJACgood@verizon.net">PJACgood@verizon.net</a>                                                                                                                                                       |
| April 17 | <u>Lely Presbyterian Church, Naples</u><br>Pastor: Rev. Dr. Jim Kirk<br>email: <a href="mailto:jimkirk12122234@gmail.com">jimkirk12122234@gmail.com</a>                                                                                                                                                |
| April 24 | <u>Moorings Presbyterian Church, Naples</u><br>Pastor: Rev. Dr. Doug Learned<br>email: <a href="mailto:jsullivan@mooringschurch.org">jsullivan@mooringschurch.org</a><br>Associate Pastor: Rev. Jaci Smith Patman<br>email: <a href="mailto:jpatman@mooringschurch.org">jpatman@mooringschurch.org</a> |

## **PRESBYTERY CALENDAR: APRIL 2016**

You may view the entire calendar on the Presbytery web site: [www.peaceriverpresbytery.org](http://www.peaceriverpresbytery.org)

### **April 4**

Planning Team (1:00-3:00 p.m.)

### **April 7**

Finance Team / Board of Trustees (9:30 a.m.-12:45 p.m.)

### **April 8-9**

Cedarkirk Spring Bash

### **April 12**

Committee on Ministry (9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.)

### **April 13**

Committee on Preparation for Ministry (10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.)

### **April 15-16**

Cedarkirk Spring Bash

### **April 20**

Mision Peniel Task Force @ Covenant P.C., Ft. Myers (9:30 -11:30 a.m.)

### **April 21**

Personnel Team (10:00-11:30 a.m.)

Congregational Grants Task Force (11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.)

Steering Committee (1:00-3:00 p.m.)

### **April 22-23**

**April 28**

Stated Meeting of Presbytery at Northminster, Sarasota



**CHURCHES OF PEACE RIVER PRESBYTERY**

**(click on church name to link to its web site)**

|                                                                    |                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Braden River Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Bradenton     | <a href="#">First Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Bradenton                                            |
| <a href="#">Kirkwood Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Bradenton         | <a href="#">Palma Sola Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Bradenton                                       |
| <a href="#">Westminster Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Bradenton      | Palmetto Presbyterian Church,<br>Palmetto – <a href="mailto:office@ppcfl.org">office@ppcfl.org</a> |
| <a href="#">Christ Church of Longboat Key</a><br>Longboat Key      | <a href="#">Peace Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Lakewood Ranch                                       |
| <a href="#">Bee Ridge Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Sarasota         | <a href="#">Church of the Palms,</a><br>Sarasota                                                   |
| <a href="#">First Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Sarasota             | <a href="#">Northminster Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Sarasota                                      |
| <a href="#">Pine Shores Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Sarasota       | <a href="#">Presbyterian Church of the<br/>Covenant, Sarasota</a>                                  |
| <a href="#">Whitfield Estates Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Sarasota | <a href="#">Siesta Key Chapel,</a><br>Sarasota                                                     |
| <a href="#">Trinity Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Venice             | <a href="#">Venice Presbyterian Church,</a><br>Venice                                              |

|                                                                                                                                        |                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#"><u>Community Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Englewood                                                                     | <a href="#"><u>First Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Arcadia           |
| <a href="#"><u>St. Paul's Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>North Port                                                                   | <a href="#"><u>Burnt Store Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Punta Gorda |
| Wintergarden Presbyterian Church,<br>Port Charlotte<br><a href="mailto:devon.ducheneau@gmail.com"><u>devon.ducheneau@gmail.com</u></a> | <a href="#"><u>First Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Port Charlotte    |
| <a href="#"><u>Holy Trinity Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>North Fort Myers                                                           |                                                                        |
| <a href="#"><u>Faith Presbyterian Church</u></a><br>Cape Coral                                                                         | <a href="#"><u>First Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Lehigh Acres      |
| <a href="#"><u>Buckingham Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Fort Myers                                                                   | <a href="#"><u>Covenant Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Fort Myers     |
| <a href="#"><u>Cypress Lake Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Fort Myers                                                                 |                                                                        |
| <a href="#"><u>Hope United Church (PCUSA),</u></a><br>Fort Myers                                                                       | <a href="#"><u>Chapel by the Sea,</u></a><br>Fort Myers Beach          |
| <a href="#"><u>First Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Bonita Springs                                                                    |                                                                        |
| <a href="#"><u>First Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Naples                                                                            | <a href="#"><u>Lely Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Naples             |
| <a href="#"><u>Moorings Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Naples                                                                         | <a href="#"><u>Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church,</u></a><br>Naples       |

