

RELIGIOUS LEADERS LETTER ON CUBA TRAVEL POLICY

December 17, 2008

President-Elect Barack Obama
233 North Michigan Ave, Suite 1100
Chicago, IL 60601

Dear President-Elect Obama:

As leaders of Christian denominations, their agencies, and ecumenical organizations in the United States, we write to express appreciation for your statements indicating a new willingness to review and revise long-standing U.S. policy toward Cuba. We have a long collective history of missionary and humanitarian activity in the nation of Cuba. Our partnership with churches, denominations, and ecumenical organizations there goes back many years, and transcends political ideologies.

We urgently request you to change the Cuba policy of the United States in ways that will assist the churches in their work and benefit all Americans.

Since 2005 U.S. church denominations, mission agencies and ecumenical organizations at the national and regional levels have suffered from severe restrictions on religious travel. We write to ask you to lift these restrictions. Our institutions are currently eligible only for very limited licenses. Some of our institutions have been unable to secure even these limited licenses.

These impractical restrictions have reduced our ability to send religious delegations to Cuba, limited our opportunities to accompany and support our Cuban church partners, and have the effect of severely limiting participation in Cuba missions by many U.S. churches and congregants. ***In addition to lifting the restrictions on religious travel, we urge you to end the travel ban for all Americans.***

We are also concerned that many Christian pastors and leaders in Cuba are unable to get visas for travel to the United States for church meetings and theological conferences. There appear to be a variety of factors at play in the denials, but one reason is the unduly negative view of the U.S. State Department toward leaders of the Cuban Council of Churches, which is the recognized ecumenical body of the traditional Cuban Protestant denominations.

We are convinced that it is time to change the ineffective and counter-productive U.S. policy toward Cuba and urge your Administration to take the following actions:

- *Freely allow religious travel to Cuba.*
- *Liberally grant visas for U.S. travel to Cuban pastors and other religious leaders, and no longer bar officials of the Cuban Council of Churches.*
- *Lift the travel ban for all Americans.*

Beyond these immediate steps, we urge you to move to end the embargo on Cuba. We believe that the time has arrived to restore normal diplomatic relations with Cuba and to allow full engagement between the people of the United States and the people of Cuba.

For decades the U.S. policy toward Cuba has had unfortunate consequences for the Cuban people, while denying important freedoms to Americans. It has failed significantly in its stated objective to precipitate change in the Cuban government. The hostility between the two governments has also limited relationships between Christians in the United States and those in Cuba, disrupting the close historical bonds between our churches. Cuban churches are growing rapidly, presenting new opportunities for U.S. churches and ecumenical institutions in the United States to relate to and support their Cuban brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thank you for recognizing and considering our concerns. We commit ourselves to pray for you, your family and your Administration. And we wish you every success in your efforts toward a more just, compassionate and peaceful world for all people.

Sincerely,

The Reverend John L. McCullough
Executive Director and CEO
Church World Service

The Reverend Dr. Michael Kinnamon
General Secretary
National Council of Churches

The Reverend Dr. Stan Hastey
Minister for Mission & Ecumenism
Alliance of Baptists

The Reverend Dr. A. Roy Medley
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches of the USA

The Reverend Dr. José Norat-Rodríguez
Area Director for Iberoamerica & the
Caribbean
American Baptist Churches of the USA

The Reverend Dr. Sharon E. Watkins
General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
in the United States and Canada

Stanley Noffsiner
General Secretary
Church of the Brethren

The Reverend Phil Jones, Director
Brethren Witness/Washington Office
Church of the Brethren

The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

The Reverend Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rolando Santiago
Executive Director
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

The Reverend Grady Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly
Presbyterian Church, (USA)

The Reverend Dr. Tyrone S. Pitts
General Secretary
Progressive National Baptist Convention

The Reverend Brenda Girton-Mitchell
Ecumenical Officer
Progressive National Baptist Convention

The Reverend Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
General Secretary
Reformed Church in America

The Reverend Dr. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

The Reverend Edward W. Paup,
General Secretary
General Board of Global Ministries
United Methodist Church.

James E. Winkler
General Secretary
General Board of Church and Society
United Methodist Church