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Communications

July 6, 2016

Immersion Trip Gave Opportunities for Pastoral Care and Counseling

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Seven students from Gardner-Webb University made history in May as the first group from the School of Divinity to travel and study in Cuba. Led by Dr. Hebert Palomino, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling, the group visited several places, including the Baptist seminary in Santiago de Cuba, where Palomino helped to establish a counseling program.

Rowena Casino, right front, shared this photo of some of the people she met in Cuba.

“The highlight for me was the opportunity to attend services in different churches,” Rowena Casino, of Boiling Springs, N.C., shared. “It was a blessing to see and experience their expression of worship. We spoke a different language, but that did not hinder us from worshipping together. The commitment and passion of the seminary community—students, administration, and staff—was another highlight. They really look out for each other and take their studies seriously. They grow fruits and vegetables and raise animals like pigs and chickens to provide for their needs.”

Palomino’s work in Cuba began 20 years ago when the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary asked him to teach counseling and pastoral care courses at Theological Seminary of Western Cuba at La Havana. When the United States restored diplomatic relations with Cuba in 2015, Palomino began formulating plans to take a group of Gardner-Webb students to the country.

“I wondered how it would be to expose some of our School of Divinity students to another culture, language, people, political system and church environment,” Palomino shared. “So I created a course, Pastoral Counseling Practicum in an Intercultural Context. I hope that the lives of these seven Gardner-Webb students may be moved to another dimension of commitment and reflection, and they can be pastoral care agents of holistic change.”

Nikki Moore, of Charlotte, N.C., sang to a nursing home patient before the group prayed for him. (Photo courtesy of Allison Greene)

School of Divinity Dean Dr. Robert Canoy approved funds to help support the trip. Also participating were Benji McMiller, Nikki Moore and Lewis Lowery, all of Charlotte, N.C., Bev Gunter, of Piedmont, S.C., Allison Greene, of Kings Mountain, N.C., and Angel Ayala,

of Dallas, N.C. On the immersion trip, the students had many opportunities to interact with Cubans in their churches, homes, the seminary and a nursing home.

During the visit to the nursing home, the group stopped at a room when they heard an employee reading the Bible to a resident. “It was a refreshing moment. The nurse, in an act of love and kindness and with no rush, read to the man,” Ayala observed. “The resident mentioned he had a son in the USA who contacted him regularly, and the group decided to pray for him. Before that happened, a member of the group, Nikki Moore, said she wanted to sing to him. She did and the entire room was filled with a calmness and serenity, which was expressed on the man’s face. We all felt it, and the room turned into a sanctuary for all of us.”

Being able to visit a country that the U.S. severed diplomatic ties with in the 1960s was fascinating for Gunter. “People have wondered about Cuba through the years, but to actually see it for myself was incredible,” she assessed. “And I didn’t just experience Cuba, I got to participate in and contribute to a team effort that forged us as one to bring encouragement, comfort, and hope to those we encountered. In nine short days, community was formed among us, and I felt it.”

Angel Ayala, of Dallas, N.C., shared this photo of the group worshipping with the church in Cuba.

McMiller was impressed with the resourcefulness of the Cubans and their generosity. “We were able to see people living in a Communist country who were able to do more with less,” he related. “They were a joyous people. The things we take for granted, they would love to have. We went to minister to them, but they ministered to us. I was reminded of what Paul said in Acts 28, the people ‘showed us no little kindness.’ The people of Cuba showed us kindness in a big and great way.”

Other unique GWU School of Divinity learning opportunities included cultural immersion trips to Latin America and to explore the lands of the Bible. To read more about the trip to Latin America, led by Dr. Terry Casino, [click here](#), and to learn more about the trip to explore the lands of the Bible, led by Dr. Robert Canoy, [click here](#).

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).