

FirstNews

OCTOBER 2023

SAVE THE DATES:

Fall Vaccine Clinic | Oct. 15
Decorate a Habitat Playhouse | Oct. 22
Haiti Luncheon | Oct. 25
Gun Violence Panel | Oct. 29
Blood Drive | Nov. 5
Global Missions Sunday | Nov. 12

From Bayonnais with Love

Nestled within the lush embrace of Haiti's northwestern region, Bayonnais stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of its people and the captivating beauty of its surroundings. The heartbeat of Bayonnais is its people, who exude warmth and resilience in equal measure. The community is tightly knit, where hospitality is not just a gesture but a way of life.

Melissa Hoffman, Executive Director of EWO Haiti, explained, "Visiting Bayonnais changed my life. This community, despite all of its hardships, is incredibly faith-filled and joyous. I fell in love with the people of Bayonnais. I feel like I know them. I've gone to church with them, I've hugged their babies, I've cried with them over loss. The only thing that separates us is where we were born in the world."

First Presbyterian partners closely with Friends Empowering Haiti and EWO, two nonprofits supporting Outreach for Christ in Bayonnais (OFCB). OFCB serves a remote mountain valley, supporting four schools, a clinic, and a local church. While we cannot visit at this time due to political unrest, this has not stopped us from supporting this community with our financial resources and prayers.

One way our church members do so is by sponsoring students. At present, 37 students are sponsored by FPC members. Sherri and Kent Buzard stand as a shining example of this partnership.

Their unwavering dedication is exemplified by their long-standing commitment to the people of Haiti. "We believe sponsorship provides hope, forms bonds, and helps to break the cycle of poverty. We have been blessed to sponsor children in Haiti for over 20 years and look forward to continuing to help where we can."

Kerloude, an OFCB graduate, describes the experience of being sponsored. "It's encouraging to me. It makes me study hard and work because I have someone who pays my school fees. Having a sponsor means a lot, especially for an orphan. I hope that God will provide for my sponsor, bless my sponsor, and keep them healthy."

On October 25, OFCB's Actionnel



Sherri and Kent Buzard with a student in Haiti

Flourisma will be on-site to share the status of the mission in Haiti and the good work being done through EWO and Friends Empowering Haiti. Learn more about our partnership with Haiti or sign up for the luncheon with Actionnel here: firstpres-charlotte.org/global-outreach. ◆



ADVOCACY MINISTRY FOCUS

Gun Violence Prevention Subcommittee

In his book "Common Ground: Talking About Gun Violence in America," Donald Gaffney writes: "What I see ... is that there seems to be much fear from everyone on the issue of guns and gun violence ... I see fear from gun rights advocates ... I also see and hear fear from gun control advocates. But these are just the fears we easily talk about. There are other fears deeper within all of us. Those fears are about losing lives, losing our own lives, or the lives of people we love. We don't want to talk about these fears. So we don't until it's too late..." (p. 93).

The Gun Violence Prevention Subcommittee seeks to understand the impacts of gun violence and to discern ways in which we, as followers of Christ, can support initiatives to reduce gun violence and lessen its impacts on our neighbors.

This month's advocacy focus is on gun violence prevention, with several opportunities to get involved: a Sunday School series, a book discussion, and a panel discussion. Learn more on our website: firstpres-charlotte.org/GVP. ◆



Bridging Faith and Borders

FPC'S PARTNERSHIP WITH CUBA'S EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

In a world often marked by division and barriers, the power of faith to unite people across borders and cultures can be truly transformative. Our church has been privileged to experience this firsthand through our partnership with the Evangelical Seminary of Theology (SET), located in Matanzas, Cuba. This collaboration has not only enriched our spiritual lives but has also forged deep connections between our congregation and the people of Cuba.

The journey for First Presbyterian member Melissa Bridges (Ricker) began when she first learned about the Cuba partnership in the weekly bulletin. Intrigued by the prospect of getting to know those who love God and who live in a country where that very public affiliation was forbidden for decades, she decided to attend an informational session. Little did she know that this decision would lead her on a profound spiritual and cultural journey.

"From that first trip to Matanzas, I felt in awe, genuinely safe, and always welcomed through true Cuban customs and experiences," Melissa reminisced. "Through the humid air breeze, traveling the tropical countryside to Matanzas – such a hidden gem of a city – arises a sense of anticipation and excitement. Driving up the steep hill to the Seminary campus feels like the first day of summer camp butterflies: excited to see old friends, to make new ones, to catch up on stories, to laugh, and to heal."

FPC member Debbie Hernandez



Debbie Hernandez, Carlos Ham, and Salvador Hernandez

had a little different experience, having already served on the Haiti Outreach team. She asked to get involved with the Cuba team too, and when Rev. Dr. Carlos Ham, president of SET, visited our congregation, she was impressed by his presentation and his friendliness, recalling she was "instantly hooked."

Some of Debbie's favorite memories of Cuba were times spent sharing meals with Carlos and his father, and their translator and driver. "We got to talk and laugh and get to know one another so well. We weren't just visitors when we left; we were truly friends – nearly family." Debbie describes what made her mission trip to Cuba such a rewarding experience: building relationships with the seminary students and professors and hearing about their work to help the locals worship at a Presbyterian church in Havana.

Both Debbie and Melissa remember the seminary students fondly. They are "convicted in their pursuit, their stories authentic, and their intrinsic motivation palpable," as Melissa puts it. Two particular students, Yoelkis and Jose, who are both blind, are especially memorable. "Jose grew up in poverty, living on the streets. He said it was God and only God who gave him direction in his life. He was one of five students we met still enrolled last year, in person, after the pandemic," Melissa shared. "I remember after leaving him and saying goodbye, I was moved to tears ... in awe of his strength, passion, and commitment. What a servant of God's work."

The upcoming mission trip, during which a group of First Presbyterian members will hand-deliver much-needed supplies to our friends at the Seminary, highlights the ongoing commitment of our



Yoelkis (center) and Melissa Bridges (second from right) with friends at the campus sanctuary.

congregation. The challenges faced by the Cuban people, exacerbated by the U.S. embargo and the impact of COVID-19, underscore the importance of our continued support and connection. Despite adversity, Melissa recalls a resilient spirit in Cuba as small communities are coming together once more, echoing the collective strength of faith and community.

The partnership between First Presbyterian and the Evangelical Seminary of Theology is a testament to the relationships that can be forged across borders and cultures when we open our hearts to the transformative forces of love and unity. We look forward to the journey ahead as we continue to build bridges, foster friendships, and bear witness to the profound impact of faith in action.

To support our mission in Cuba, we ask for prayers for the safety of our travelers and for God to open the hearts of our team members and those they encounter on their journey. Additionally, we invite you to contribute to our mission by helping us gather the essential supplies we will take to our partners. You can shop our Amazon wishlist at the QR code below. We also need donations of gently used, large rolling suitcases to carry the wishlist items we will bring. Learn more about FPC's global outreach efforts at firstpres-charlotte.org/global-outreach. ♦

