

April 12, 2018

Dear Member of Congress:

As faith leaders in the United States we write to you today with great concern about recent U.S. decisions regarding our Embassy in Havana, the suspension of visas and the State Department travel advisory. Our faith partners in Cuba tell us that these changes are causing serious hardships for many ordinary Cubans. We request that you urge the Administration to reverse these decisions.

As a consequence of mysterious and unexplained health issues reported by some U.S. personnel serving at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba, the U.S. Department of State ordered the departure of all nonessential U.S. diplomats from the embassy in Havana, Cuba. This has resulted in a suspension of virtually all consular services at the embassy. Cuban citizens

wanting to visit family in the United States for emergencies, or connect with church partners, or attend faith-based meetings or assemblies, are unable to do so.

The suspension of visa processing within Cuba requires any Cuban citizen wishing to apply for a visa to do so at a U.S. Embassy outside of Cuba. The increasing costs and complications of the application process—which requires rescheduling interviews, obtaining visas for third countries, international travel, and paying to stay there for at least two weeks—have caused much anguish among our Cuban partners on the island and their families abroad.

Beyond the ordered departure, the State Department has also issued a travel advisory for U.S. citizen travel to Cuba, even though Cuba is internationally well-known as a safe destination, and trips for religious, educational and family visits are permitted under Trump Administration policies. The travel advisory and amended regulations however, make travel more difficult, resulting in a significant reduction of U.S. travelers to Cuba.

This has had a direct and negative impact on Cuban citizens, including those in the faith community. Many Cubans, taking advantage of new economic possibilities in Cuba, have opened privately-owned bed-and-breakfasts and restaurants, as well as other small businesses. With the downturn in U.S. travel, these private businesses have suffered a severe loss of customers and of income. Many of them have been forced to close.

Further, converting Cuba to an unaccompanied diplomatic post inaccurately and inappropriately ranks Cuba along with other unaccompanied posts, which include Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan. This exacerbates the hardships experienced by our Cuban sisters and brothers in our partner churches on the island.

Religious freedom and religious life have grown dramatically in Cuba in the last two decades, and religious attendance – among Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim communities – has grown as well. The faith community is playing a greater role in the life of the Cuban people, and we look forward to its continuing growth and

expansion. Policies that undermine normalized relations only serve hamper these steps forward. We strongly urge you to press the administration for the re-staffing of the embassy in Havana, the reinstatement of consular services at the embassy, and the removal of the travel advisory for U.S. citizen to travel to the island.

Sincerely,

Rev. Paula Clayton Dempsey
Minister for Partnership Relations
Alliance of Baptists

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian
Legate
Armenian Orthodox Church

Rev. Teresa Hord Owens
General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

Rev. John L. McCullough
President and CEO
Church World Service

Patrick Carolan
Executive Director
Franciscan Action Network

Diane Randall
Executive Secretary
Friends Committee on National Legislation

Colin Saxton
General Secretary
Friends United Meeting

J Ron Byler
Executive Director
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

Jim Winkler
General Secretary/President
National Council of Churches in the USA

Rev. Dr. J Herbert Nelson
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly
Presbyterian Church (USA)

Dr. Timothy Tee Boddie
General Secretary
Progressive National Baptist Convention

Lawrence Couch
Director
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

Rev. John C. Dorhauer
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe
General Secretary
General Board of Church and Society
The United Methodist Church