

## Churches gaining freedom

# Weight of communism hurting Cubans

By Michael Ray  
Staff Writer

When governments are at odds, sometimes we forget that the people those governments represent are not necessarily the enemy. That's one thing Fulton resident Charlotte Ward learned on her recent trip to Cuba.

Ward went as part of a mission team from the United Methodist Church. Their goal was to learn what the Methodist churches in Cuba need to survive and grow. In the process, the group learned a lot about life in Cuba and, perhaps, a little about themselves.

Life under Fidel Castro has certainly been hard on most of Cuba's population. And while the people "seemed so tired and beat down," Ward said, "they also seemed so warm."

"The people were never really the problem — it was the government. These are regular human

beings and things are so difficult for them," she said.

While affluent and influential Cubans can get whatever they want, the average Cuban receives a minimum amount of food rations each month. Each person gets six pounds of rice, four pounds of beans, four pounds of sugar, and one liter of cooking oil. They also get one small loaf of bread a day.

Babies get a milk ration but children and adults do not. One Cuban doctor told Ward that, for the first time in memory, they are beginning to see malnutrition as a serious problem and she expects it to get worse.

Material for clothing is also in short supply. "A man gets a pair of pants every other year and shoes every other year," Ward said. Other items are even harder to get. A bar of soap, for instance, is nearly impossible to find.

The primary mode of trans-

portation for many Cubans is the bicycle, since gasoline for cars is very scarce. In fact, while Cuba has a low crime rate, the stealing of bicycles is one of the biggest crimes.

Cuba was never an affluent country while it was a Soviet satellite, but the collapse of the Soviet Union has deepened the problems. But the collapse of their benefactor may eventually help restore Cuba's ties to the U.S. and other currently antagonistic nations.

The U.S. has maintained a tight economic embargo against Cuba since 1962. For years it was illegal for Americans to travel to Cuba and there are still some travel restrictions.

After the Cuban missile crisis in Oct. 1962, tensions became so great between the government and churches that many church leaders were arrested and forced to work in the sugar fields.

Churches have struggled to

survive in a very hostile, communistic environment. Since 1959, it has been illegal to build new church buildings or to openly try to teach and convert people to Christianity.

But in recent years, churches have been given more freedom. Now, while there are still restrictions on their activities, church groups are welcome to travel in Cuba, under certain conditions.

When Ward and her group arrived at the Havana airport, she admits she was a little apprehensive. Much of her concerns were laid to rest by a passport officer who wanted to know why she was in Cuba. When Ward said she was there as part of a church mission effort, the passport officer smiled and said "Oh, that's very important."

While there are restrictions against trade with Cuba, Ward and her group, which included

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### *First hand view*

A Methodist church building in Havana, Cuba, was one of the churches visited by Fulton resident Charlotte Ward on a recent mission trip. Ward and 11 others went to visit churches in Cuba.

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11 others, were allowed to take 22 pounds of medical supplies into the country.

The group travelled around Cuba, seeing many churches in need of repairs. One of the group's goals is to make Methodist churches in the U.S. aware of the needs of their Cuban counterparts.

Many experts on Cuba believe ~~Cástró's reign over Cuba~~ may not last very many more years. Ward's experiences confirmed that he is "losing some of his popularity. The people are becoming disillusioned by the Revolution," she said, at least in part because of the shortages and the lower standard of living.

"The people struck me as being very cultured and very well mannered," Ward said. "I didn't want to leave. I'd love to go back."

Ward's husband, Raymond, serves as minister for the Bethlehem, Wesley and Water Valley Methodist Churches.