

by Jim Hodgson

Attitude Adjustment

A global network of disabilities advocates is changing perceptions



Ezequiel Batista, left, and members of the Haitian churches' network of people with disabilities during a meeting with United Church pastoral visitors, April 2010.

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“A central premise of Christianity is love,” says the Rev. Noel Fernández, a Baptist pastor in central Cuba. “But sometimes this gets confused with pity. Instead of understanding the nature of God as a sign of solidarity, we get paternalism and marginalization.”

Fernández is coordinator of the Cuban Council of Churches' Disabled Persons Pastoral Ministry, a national team of nine people. Each member has a different specialty: one works primarily with people who are Deaf, another with those living with multiple sclerosis, and so on.

Fernández, who is blind, is also Latin America coordinator of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), a global advocacy organization. Like other EDAN members, Fernández works through churches and seminaries to change paternalistic attitudes, which, as he wryly observes, “are very well planted in Latin America.”

The United Church of Canada is a partner in these struggles. The Cuban Council of Churches has received Mission and Service Fund support since 1996; EDAN since 2003. Through the efforts of these church-based organizations, and those of many others, a global network is taking shape among advocates of and for people living with disabilities.

In Haiti, disabilities advocates have become key participants

in church support to survivors of the January 2010 earthquake. The Rev. Ezequiel Batista and Yaniurka Mosquera, a young missionary couple from Cuba, had been working in Haiti when the earthquake struck.

They'd been sent to Haiti by the Cuban Council of Churches after Fernández first visited there in 2006. Shortly after returning home, Fernández mustered support to send the couple to help build a new network of people with disabilities among Haitian Protestant churches.

In a makeshift guesthouse in earthquake-damaged Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Batista, also a Baptist, speaks passionately about finding ways for differently abled people to participate fully in their communities. At the time of the quake, the couple had been on a visit with their one-year-old daughter Estercita in the neighbouring Dominican Republic. Their house in the Haitian capital collapsed. With 600,000 homeless people in the city, Mosquera opted not to return with their daughter until new housing

can be found. But Batista immediately joined relief efforts.

Not only were people with handicaps among the most vulnerable during the moments of the earthquake itself, they were also the least able to join long lines for food, medicine, and water in its aftermath. As many as 300,000 people may be struggling with injuries caused during the earthquake, and there are about 4,000 amputees. “Haiti will be the country with the greatest need for canes and wheelchairs, as well as for psychological, moral, and spiritual support,” says Fernández.

About 600 individuals with disabilities and their families are receiving support through the United States ecumenical agency Church World Service (CWS), one component of ACT Alliance, a global church-based alliance for humanitarian assistance in which the United Church is a member. Through the efforts of Batista and his co-workers, and with the financial support of the United Church through ACT and CWS, aid is arriving. Batista's goal is to make conditions better than they were before the earthquake. ■

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