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Pastors for Peace representative to stop in Pocatello

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A group working to end the more than 50-year-old U.S. blockade on Cuba and provide humanitarian aid to the country will be traveling throughout the U.S. this month to collect donations and share its message.

The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization's Pastors for Peace will hold their 25th Friendship Caravan to Cuba this month. Group members will stop in 65 U.S. cities, and one representative, Dr. Leni Villagomez Reeves, a retired physician and specialist in pediatric emergency medicine, will visit with people in Pocatello on July 13, according to a news release.

Reeves will be meeting with members of First Congregational United Church of Christ and Pocatello Unitarian Universalist Fellowship as well as anyone else who wants to attend the event. The meeting will take place at First Congregational UCC, located at 309 N. Garfield in Pocatello, at 6 p.m.

The event is free, but people are asked to bring a salad, vegetable dish or dessert to share at a potluck dinner, said Larry Gebhardt with First Congregational UCC.

He encourages people to attend.

"The event will be informative and a chance to have conversation with Dr. Reeves, whose focus is improving the health status of Cuban children," he said, adding that this year's caravan is centered on youth in the country. "Conversation will include more about what advocates of ending the Cuba blockade can do to influence supportive government and business leaders."

Gebhardt said the churches, which are committed to peace and justice activities, feel it is important to get involved in this event.

He said the blockade prevents Cuban people from fully participating in economic, cultural and educational activities and isolates families with members in Cuba and the U.S.

"The First Congregational UCC congregation has former members who lived in Cuba, and who know and work with Cuban immigrants who have become U.S.A. professionals such as physicians and attorneys," he said.

Don Allen, a member of the Pocatello Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, said his father lived in Cuba for four years as a child and always wanted to go back and see the area again.

"For a long time he couldn't," Allen said, adding that he was eventually able to go back, but only as part of an educational trip when regulations were relaxed.

As some bipartisan congressional and business leaders urge President Barack Obama and his administration to fully lift the blockade, Pastors for Peace are continuing their efforts to achieve that same goal, according to a news release.

"Our caravans are not charity, but an act of civil disobedience to remind the U.S. government that the U.S. people are united with the world in their condemnation of this policy and that people-to-people exchanges will not be stopped," Gail Walker, co-director of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, said in a news release.

The caravan is planning to take some hard-to-obtain medical supplies to Cuba, according to the news release. Gebhardt said local people can also make donations to the cause. Even small items like screws, bolts, nuts and hinges are appreciated, he said.

Gebhardt said he agrees with Pastors for Peace's push to end the blockade in Cuba, which he feels not only lowers Cubans' quality of life and opportunities for cultural and economic connections with the U.S., but also hurts both countries.

"Restored regular trade between Cuba and the U.S.A. would help both economies. The U.S.A. could have another nearby market to export goods and services that Cuban people want and need," he said. "Cuba products, tourism and Cuba services could become available for Americans."

Gebhardt believes it's time for both countries to move on.

"The causes of political anger with Cuba from Cold War days have faded into history," he said. "It will be just and fair to stop penalizing Cuban people for government policies and errors made so many years ago."

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