

# U.S., Cuban church leaders seek normalized relations

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Church leaders from ecumenical councils in the U.S. and Cuba wrapped up a five-day meeting in Havana on December 2 with a call for "normalized relations" between the two countries. A joint statement said that the long U.S. embargo against Cuba and "a half century of animosity between our countries" must end.

The 16-member National Council of Churches delegation and leaders of the Council of Churches of Cuba noted that their meeting grew out of strengthened ties formed when Cuban church representatives took part in the NCC's 2010 General Assembly.

The church leaders thanked the Obama administration for lifting some restrictions on travel to Cuba last January but called for the "speedy and complete fulfillment" of the president's public intention "to review and revise long-standing U.S. policy toward Cuba."

Michael Kinnamon, the outgoing NCC general secretary, said in a sermon November 27 at the National Episcopal Cathedral that besides the blockade, two other issues hang over Cuban-U.S. relations. One is the U.S. imprisonment in 1998 of the Cuban Five, five Cuban intelligence officers, which some U.S. churches and Amnesty International have condemned.

The other issue is the Cuban incarceration nearly two years ago of U.S. citizen Alan Gross, who brought restricted communications equipment into the island country to aid Internet access for a small Jewish community. Kinnamon visited Gross in jail before he and others in the NCC delegation met with Cuban President Raul Castro.

Kinnamon

said he and Castro discussed possible "small steps" to be taken, such as cooperation on drug and human trafficking in the Caribbean and improved air traffic control with updated equipment. The chances for such cooperation "are complicated in an election year," he said at a packed press conference in Havana, "but I am a person of faith so I always live in hope."

Cuba will have another religious visitor in March. Pope Benedict XVI confirmed on December 12 that he will travel to Cuba and Mexico next year. Press reports said the two-country visit will begin March 23.

Benedict said he hoped his trip would contribute to the construction of a society "rooted in the development of the common good, the triumph of love and the spread of justice."

After

a historic visit by the late Pope John Paul II in 1998, relations between the Vatican and Cuba have improved in recent years. In 2011, church officials helped secure the release of 115 political prisoners who left Cuba to go into exile in Spain.

The Vatican ambassador to Cuba, Giovanni Angelo Becciu, a key figure in Vatican dialogue with the Castro regime, was promoted last May to the no. 2 position in the Vatican's secretariat of state. —RNS, other sources