For the past two decades the Alliance of Baptists has enjoyed a fruitful partnership with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba (Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba). This relationship has included visits of official delegations from both groups for the purpose of participating in annual meetings and other occasions. More than two dozen partnerships between local congregations have been nurtured and supported by the Alliance and Fraternity, most of which continue to provide vibrant evidence of mutual benefit and blessing.

During these years the Alliance has spoken out repeatedly asking our government to reexamine its 50-year policies of isolating Cuba and her people by means of an economic embargo and travel restrictions. Only once during this entire time—during the presidency of Jimmy Carter—did the United States take steps to normalize relations with our Caribbean neighbor 90 miles south of the Florida straits, an effort that ended with Mr. Carter’s defeat in 1980.

Although travel restrictions have been eased during the presidency of Barack Obama, especially when contrasted with the draconian policies of his predecessor, much remains to be done. We are grateful to President Obama for fulfilling his pledge as a candidate in 2008 to restore the right to travel for Cuban-Americans, whose ability to visit their relatives in Cuba had been severely restricted during his predecessor’s two terms in office. We are grateful as well for the Obama administration’s easing of travel restrictions for cultural, educational and religious groups on this side of the divide between the two nations. Just as important, we urge the administration to ease travel restrictions that continue to be imposed on our Cuban colleagues in coming to the U.S. because of the State Department’s absurd designation of Cuba as a “terrorist state,” a designation we categorically reject.

In spite of these and other obstacles to the normalization of relations between our countries, we call on both governments to give evidence of good faith going forward in the treatment of prisoners held by both sides.

We call on the Obama administration to undertake a comprehensive review of the cases of the “Cuban 5,” intelligence agents arrested in 1998 and later convicted of espionage on what we believe were specious charges. Following a trial of seven months in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida and jury deliberations of less than a day, the five were sentenced to long terms and sent to five separate federal prisons. Three of the five are serving life terms; one, the group’s acknowledged leader, was sentenced to two consecutive life terms and the others to terms of 19 and 15 years. The last of these has served his entire term but remains on probation and thus has not been allowed to return to Cuba. We
believe each of the remaining four prisoners should be released for time already served.

Among many respected individuals and organizations calling for a redress of the cases are President Carter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and several other Nobel Prize laureates; as well as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and Amnesty International.

Likewise we call on the government of the Republic of Cuba to release Alan Gross on humanitarian grounds. Imprisoned and convicted on charges of undermining state security in 2009, Gross suffers life-threatening illnesses. An international development specialist, he was arrested in Cuba as a contractor for the U.S. Agency for International Development while working on projects authorized and funded by the Helms-Burton Act calling for regime change in Cuba. Ostensibly, his mission was to set up satellite communications systems for three tiny Jewish communities on the island, thereby circumventing restrictions of the Cuban government on equipment required for such ends. Gross was convicted and sentenced to a 15-year term in March 2011, and has exhausted his appeals. Several high-level American visitors to Cuba, including President Carter, have asked for Mr. Gross’s release.

We recognize that any U.S. administration is limited in what it can do alone to end the outdated economic and political isolation of Cuba on the part of our country, given that Congress must specifically repeal the Helms-Burton Act before normalization of relations may come to pass. We pledge our continued efforts to that end, along with those of many other citizens. Together we yearn for a new day in U.S.-Cuba relations for the mutual benefit of the people of both these sovereign nations.

To our beloved partners in the Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba, we pledge our commitment to strengthen ties by every means at our disposal, including our continuing prayers for their well-being and our untiring efforts as citizens of the United States to effectuate the needed changes in our nation’s policies toward Cuba.