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Nicaragua Mission Trip Reflections 9-10-17
Deuteronomy 15:7-11, 1 Peter 4:7-11

On Sunday July 23 Laura Harrington, Taylor Owen, John and Clare Bloss, Emily Thompson, Peter and Leslie Isakoff, Becca Gordon, Jenny Beale, Victoria Ball, and I gathered here at the church, loaded the bus, held hands, said a prayer, and left for a week-long mission trip to Nicaragua. We ranged in age from 17 to 75 years old. Our main goal was to build relationships not only with the people in Nicaragua but with Tracey King-Ortega, the missionary our congregation helps to sponsor there. A secondary goal for us was to help with the construction of an aquifer (more about that in a minute). A third goal was that nobody would get seriously sick or injured and that God would help us grow spiritually.

You may know that Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (only Haiti is poorer). Almost 80% of the population lives on less than two dollars a day. To prepare for the trip we got vaccines for malaria, typhoid fever, and Hepatitis A. This was going to be a challenge.

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Two members of the Mission Committee drove us to RDU and sent us off with hugs. We flew to Miami and then to Nicaragua's capital city, Managua. Customs was a breeze and after gathering our bags we met our main leader for the trip, Luis, a short, thin, cheerful Nicaraguan man wearing a t-shirt plastered with Al Pacino's face courtesy of "The Godfather" movies. Later on, we met a young Nicaraguan woman named Yemila, our second leader for the trip. She and Luis were so kind and patient throughout our time, and they both had a nice sense of humor.

Luggage stowed on the van, our driver, Keveen, weaved through the untamed Managua traffic with a peace that passeth my understanding. In less than an hour we arrived at the Nehemiah Guest House for a brief orientation and delicious meal. There was a covered outdoor courtyard where we met and ate, and our rooms were attached at the back.

While there we took cold showers and we drank and brushed our teeth with bottled water. Geckos crawled on the walls. We were warned

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to keep an eye out for scorpions that might decide to crawl into our shoes at night, but we didn't see scorpions during the entire trip. At one point a tarantula plopped from the ceiling onto a bed in one of the women's rooms. Clare, our 17-year-old participant, picked up a notebook and shooed it away. We thought we were roughing it. Little did we know.

On Monday we met Tracey and heard presentations about the work we would do and about CEPAD, the sponsoring council of Protestant churches started in 1972 as a response to the earthquake that leveled Managua. CEPAD focuses on leadership training, food and environmental security, strengthening of families, and community banks and micro-loans. How cool would it be to provide a micro-loan for somebody in Nicaragua as an honorary Christmas gift for a loved one this year?

In the afternoon, we went to a Fair Trade store and bought items that put money into the pockets of hard-working Nicaraguans. We also toured beautiful and historic Managua. At one point, we visited a site

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that provided graphic reminders of some of our own country's meddling in Nicaragua's governance over the years. I asked Luis about this. And he said Nicaraguans make a distinction between our government and our people.

As Christians, we celebrate the generosity of our country, but we also remember, as scripture teaches, that we are flawed and sinful and always in need of forgiveness and growth.

On Tuesday we boarded the van and went to stay a few days in Bijague, a remote farming village in the mountains of the Matagalpa region. Upon our arrival, dozens of villagers of all ages lined the street to welcome us. Plastic lawn chairs were brought and we sat while children performed traditional dances. A community leader offered a brief speech, as did Leslie Isakoff who spoke eloquently.

We were shown to our quarters, a house the owner had recently vacated. Stone and mortar walls. A tin roof with a few holes in it that leaked. Two rooms and a kitchen we would use as a changing room. Barred windows without screens. Dirt floors throughout. Electricity

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available most of the time from a couple suspicious-looking outlets. In the pasture behind the house was an outhouse with termites and other bugs crawling around in it. Yeah. It was primitive.

Cows, chickens, and a rooster (that insisted on wake-up crowing between 2:20 and 3:40 a.m.) wandered a few feet away, and pigs also sometimes visited. It was the rainy season, muddy, and I was worried about cross contamination from the animals. I pulled Becca, an RN, aside and shared my concerns. She said, “I think we’ll be okay.” So we put down a few plastic sheets and our mats and stayed.

Later we learned that some groups showed up, saw the humble accommodations, and demanded to be taken to a hotel. This was a terrible wound for our hosts. If we’d done the same, we would’ve missed a life-changing opportunity for solidarity and learning. And as Leslie reminded me, there are people in Greensboro who live in housing that’s not nearly as clean or well-maintained.

Trip highlights? Definitely playing with the kids. We played soccer in the street with them each day. (The kids cheated and so did we!) Clare

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would race the boys and win. Several of our women danced with the kids. And the children were fascinated by the soap bubbles Laura brought. Other highlights? Simple shared meals together. Visiting the lush farms grown in rich, dark soil and seeing how CEPAD is teaching the farmers to diversify and grow more effectively. Helping dig a small aquifer for watering crops and a retention wall to slow erosion. Evening outdoor devotionals.

Some observations.

One afternoon our group joined in worship at a Catholic church in the village. During prayer requests a woman from the village asked for prayer for the poor and suffering in the world, but we realized she was not thinking of herself as being in that category. And, of course, she probably had a simple house, clothing, some animals, and crops. So she did not see herself as poor and suffering, even though in some ways she is. Sociologists say poverty in wealthier nations, such as ours, presents an additional challenge for the poor because they are demoralized by constantly seeing wealth around them out of reach.

At one point Luis mentioned that he'd been in a motorcycle accident that put him out of work for a few months. Fortunately, Nicaragua provides health coverage for all its citizens. If the 2nd poorest country in the Western Hemisphere can provide universal health coverage for its citizens, surely the U.S. can too. Right?

Where did I see God? Pretty much everywhere. In the smiles and sweet spirit of the Nicaraguan people, particularly the little ones. In how patient and kind our group members were with each other. In the beauty of the green mountainsides and the thriving variety of crops. In the hope Christ gives us.

Where did I see need? Pretty much everywhere. Many of the people, especially the children, desperately need to see a dentist. And imagine the homes with sturdy roofs, hardwood floors, indoor toilets, and hot and cold running water in them.

As God commands us in Deuteronomy 15, "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand..."

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Does our country really need to add more nuclear weapons to our arsenal? Couldn't we give away more money and resources to our neighbors in need?

The people of the village have asked if we would build a community center. How much would such a center cost? Maybe six or seven thousand dollars. We told them we want to build relationships first, but we would think and pray and talk about it. How wonderful would it be if we could build relationships with this village over the years, and see the children grow up, healthy and strong, and for them to have a community center as a central part of it all? How wonderful would it be?

Thank you Guilford Park for sending us. Thank you God for guiding us and for giving us the opportunity to be instruments of your peace. Amen.