
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Nicaragua Partnership Moments

by

Bruce Brown

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

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♯ God is still speaking,

Bruce Brown

Children's Time

How many of you are going back to school tomorrow?
How many of you have already started school?

Today our church family is going to learn about Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is located in Central America. In fact, it is exactly halfway between North and South America. It is about as big as New York State and has population of just under 6 million people. Nicaragua is the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

While we were there, we saw many volcanoes, several with smoke coming out of them.

Spanish is their language, which was a lot of fun for me because my parents thought that I should take French when I went to high school.

The school year in Nicaragua goes from February to November each year. As such, they were about halfway through their school year when we were down their week before last. Because they are very poor, their schools are not like yours. Those children that go to school, have no books to learn from. They sit in very hot rooms with no air conditioning, and teachers do their best to educate them. They do not have television, they do not have a library. If they are lucky, the whole school may have one or two computers for all to share. Because their country is poor, they will go to school wherever they can. At one place that we saw in the rainforest area there was a one-room cement building that was a former kitchen where 120 kids went to daycare. There were three tables and maybe 20 chairs, no paint on the walls and bars on the windows. Despite these conditions, the children that are lucky enough to go to school are happy to do so. They know by going to school they may have a chance to break their cycle of poverty. They are happy to be there and to learn something. The reason that they feel lucky is because most of their parents never went to school, and many other children in their country do not go to school either.

One day when we went to the market to buy food, there was a boy sitting with his mother who was selling dried fish and some tamales in banana leaves. When I asked him how old he was, he said that he was ten. When I asked him what year in school he was, before he could answer, his mother said that he could not go to school because she needed him to work. Although the boy did not say anything else, I could tell that he was sad about not being able to attend school.

Coffee plantation/Santa Emilia talk

In the central mountainous part of Nicaragua, in the rainforests near the city of Matagalpa (MOTT-AH-GALL-PA) is the village of Santa Emilia. Santa Emilia is in the heart of coffee-growing country and has a coffee plantation which is home to approximately 36 families. These families are part of a new "model farm project" being developed through a partnership between the company owners, the coffee-pickers, and a Nicaraguan social service agency.

The goal of the project is to improve the living and social conditions of coffee workers and their families by moving them from the migrant, dorm style bunk bed housing (the lifestyle that most of them have known all their lives), into a neighborhood style setting of single-family apartment units.

By breaking the cycle of poverty that they have known their whole lives, it is hoped that this new project will help the Nicaraguan people to build their capacity and skills towards self-determination and community awareness and development.

The people of Santa Emilia are seeking one or two global partners for solidarity and support as they develop leadership skills and self determination. In so doing, they will create a healthy and safe environment for their children and work with surrounding communities to establish and support a day-care center, a school system, a series of health clinics and other basic community services.

Terri Brown

On the second day of our Nicaragua adventure we were given the task of shopping.

The average Nicaragua family of four: mom, dad, and two children, makes slightly less than one US dollar a day, or 20 Nicaraguan Cordovas. So our task was to go to the market with 20 Cordovas and buy enough food to feed our family of four for a day. We split up into teams and went out shopping. The markets are not like we think of our markets: nice, air conditioned, all food items kept at their required temperature. We were at an outdoor market, and everything from shoes and clothes to toys and tools, from fruit, meat ,fish and cheese were just out in the hot sun.

So we were off to shop for a day's worth of food for a family of four with our 20 Cordovas (US \$1). We walked up and down a few aisles of the local market and saw people of all ages selling their goods trying to make a daily wage. We came to a space that had food, the lady had three different prices for rice and two different prices for beans. Rice and beans are the staple food for every Nicaraguan family.

The rice ranged from 8 to13 Cordovas a pound and the beans ranged from 8 to10 Cordovas a pound. My team decided to go with the middle priced rice and the cheaper beans. So we bought $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of rice and $\frac{1}{2}$ pound of beans.

With the eight and a half Cordovas that we had left, we went walking around to find some fruit and vegetables to supplement our basics. We ended up getting one onion, one tomato, one papaya and four plantains. The other groups got basically the same meals, with some pineapple, leeches and tortillas. I think we had one Cordova left.

So this is what a family of four would have for breakfast, lunch and dinner almost every day. As you can see, 20 Cordovas does not go very far to feed a family of four.

The malnutrition among children is 40 percent nationally and 60 to 70 percent in the rural areas.

Unemployment is 60 percent nationally and 95 percent in rural areas.

82.3 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty on less than \$1 per day, and in many rural areas the poverty is much worse. Nicaragua's geology, climate, and location have made it prone to a host of natural disasters including volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, droughts, and hurricanes all which accelerate the cycle of poverty.

Nicholas Wenham

What comes to your mind when the term “medical clinic” is mentioned? I know that, for me, visions of pristine hallways, a plethora of medical instruments and machines, people in clean lab coats dashing in and out of patient exam rooms are some of the images that surface in my mind. My recent experience in the medical clinic in Chacraseca, Nicaragua, has forever transformed that image. On one of the days while we were there, Pastor Nancy and I chose to stay behind from the house-building worksite in order to shadow the doctors for a morning in the medical clinic.

As we walked down the dusty road toward the entrance to the clinic, I realized that this wasn't going to be an experience like I had ever had in the past. We were greeted by the receptionist in the front waiting room; a simple room which had a cement floor, wooden benches along the perimeter, and open air windows on two walls. There were probably a dozen or so women and children sitting on those benches along the wall, waiting patiently for their turn to see the doctor. This clinic had two doctors who saw patients during the morning times throughout the week. It appeared that this was going to be a busy morning.

The receptionist showed Pastor Nancy and I to the doctor's exam room, where the doctor greeted us with a large smile and invited us in. It was a small room, with only an old dentist's chair along the wall, a small round table in the middle of the room, and two chairs. As the first patient came in, she was carrying a little child in her arms. He was suffering from diarrhea. The doctor listened to the symptoms, then wrote out a prescription, gave it to the mother, and the two left. Since medicines are scarce in Chacraseca, the woman and her small child would have to walk to the pharmacy to receive the medication that would make her child well. And this wouldn't be a quick trip to the local CVS or Walgreen's down the street. This pharmacy trek would most likely consume the rest of their day.

Next came a young girl into the doctor's exam room—probably twelve or thirteen years old. She made little eye contact with any of us; and just sat with her head hung low. I looked into her eyes as she was talking to the doctor and I could sense a deep sadness in her expression. Since I am not totally fluent in Spanish, I was looking to Pastor Nancy for translations of what was being discussed when I couldn't understand. I finally realized why the girl was in the clinic—she was most likely pregnant. This is a reality of life in Chacraseca. Teen pregnancy is rampant, and resources to help these young mothers-to-be are few. Abortion is illegal and therefore not an option. These young women, still children, are scared but have no other option other than to prepare for motherhood. Sexual education is limited in Chacraseca, although attempts are being made to educate people about their bodies. There were several other patients—young pregnant teenagers, sick babies with diarrhea, and a woman with a skin rash. These people came for healing—mainly physical, but also emotional. Being a witness to the depth of compassion that the doctors gave to each patient was truly inspiring and will stay in my heart for a long time to come.

My mind raced as each patient came and went. What could I do to help this situation? Looking around and seeing limited medications and limited medical tools, I began to question whether anything could be done. On my own, I would say that nothing can be done to help. However, it is

my faith in God that stirs in me a hope of a vision where we can help. My faith in Jesus the Christ urges me to not stand still, but to act. The power of the Holy Spirit gives me the strength and the courage to share this news with the people of God in hopes that others will feel called to join in this effort. What does your faith ask of you? How are you called to be bearers of God's justice and love in today's world? May all of us, empowered by the Holy Spirit dare to ask God for guidance, trusting that God who called us will be with us on the journey. Amen.

Nancy Elsenheimer

I understand more Spanish than I can speak, forgetting my verb conjugation and vocabulary. Nicholas and I spent a morning with Dr. Daisy, and she was telling me that this child had a parasite from the unclean, contaminated water. "Do you understand?" she asked me. "What did I say?" "Yes, I understand. I AM A PARASITE."

This was an exploration trip. At the urging of the Ministry of Service we planned this trip to Nicaragua with the intention of asking ourselves, "What would it look like for Church of the Beatitudes to be in partnership with a community in Nicaragua on a long term, sustainable journey of solidarity?" What would it look like if we traveled there, and they traveled here? What would it look like as we make decisions for our lives and our church's life, we would ask, how does this affect our partners in Nicaragua?

When Ted and I interviewed here, we were asked, "Are we a church that gives to mission, or does mission? Actually, we are both. Church of the Beatitudes at its best has reached out beyond its own walls from its very formation.

We worked through JustHope.org, an organization founded by Rev. Leslie Penrose, a UCC pastor who has been traveling to Nicaragua for about twenty years now. We lived in the community; we built a house for a family; we saw children in their schools. We gave away everything you gave us, from the bats and balls to the Girls and Boys Club, to the school supplies, to the \$500 from the Health Cabinet purchased supplies for the dentist who will be in the clinic every Friday and who had just a dentist's chair. The supplies we purchased will allow her to treat over 300 patients.

We were guests at an elementary school who presented a concert on recorders and chimes (compliments of United Church of the Valley, Murietta, California). The principal Rosa is arranging for four classrooms to write to us (and we have already received their letters). The Pastoral Committee will determine which children get the scholarships so that they can attend school.

Thirty years ago the Mary Knoll Sisters came to Chacraseca and began to talk about liberation theology, God is on the side of the poor. By working together, they have slowly made gains for the life of all the people (todos, no algunos), all not some. All get clean water, food, electricity, jobs, education, healthcare, now computers, technology, advances in farming. Micro loans have helped a women's cooperative start craft making businesses and soon a bakery will open with women running it for profit. Another micro loan is being considered to fund a sewing cooperative, and the making of liturgical stoles for sale in the United States.

And so we went exploring: what would it mean if Church of the Beatitudes were to be in partnership with the people in Nicaragua, people who have hopes and dreams for clean water, for food and meaningful work? What would it mean if Church of the Beatitudes were to be in solidarity with people who hope for education for their children, who want access to healthcare?

Solidarity and partnership come when you build a relationship, when you come to know the real struggles of real people. We can tell you stories of people we met. Our lives were touched as we saw people grateful and renewed because we shared Christ's compassion, love and hope through our work. We were blessed. Jesus' words to his followers were Blessed are you when you go to the poor, when you hunger with the poor for justice.

I pray we will continue to explore this partnership, to live in solidarity, to be the body of Christ. Amen.