

Nicaragua Trip Report February 2014

Ten representatives from First Pres (including 7 adult members, 2 youth, and 1 resident minister) traveled to San Jose de los Remates to begin a partnership with eight communities located in the Boaco Department in Nicaragua. Carol Smith, Paul Smith, Marti Wendler, Karen Walter, Sue Jeffers, Richard Lord, Lenore Webb, Oscar Webb, Tavo Webb and Lal Rodawla spent eight days working together to provide a foundation for future First Pres mission teams as our church establishes a relationship with members of the eight communities. Through visits, conversations, and the building of eight bookshelves for schools, we managed to touch base with a large number of residents of the communities.

The trip followed two exploratory visits made by First Pres Nicaraguan Mission Team members in August 2012 and April 2013. As a result of the information gained during those trips and an initial meeting with leaders of the eight communities, the mission team made the decision to send its first work team to the area in February 2014. It was also decided that an attempt would be made to incorporate youth on the team. Accordingly, the trip was planned for the Ann Arbor area winter school break.

The mission team's trip was organized by CEPAD, an organization through which PC(USA) conducts its mission presence in Nicaragua. Established in 1972 in response to the earthquake in Managua, CEPAD is an alliance of Nicaraguan Christian denominations, institutions, and local pastoral communities, working to provide emergency relief, rural development and peace building and assisting the more vulnerable poor communities of the country. The eight communities with which First Pres is establishing a partnership have all participated in CEPAD's ongoing programs for community development.

CEPAD offers several types of projects for visiting churches—from a one-time mission work project to a more formalized partnership. Currently about 12 such partnerships exist, including one by the Lake Michigan Presbytery. CEPAD acts as the third party to help with translation, facilitation and mutual accountability.

Our mission team arrived in Managua Saturday evening on February 15. We spent that evening and the next at CEPAD's Nehemiah House—a facility that

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houses missionaries and provides classrooms for programs offered to members of communities served by CEPAD. On Sunday, our team eased into Nicaraguan culture by touring parts of Managua and by listening to presentations outlining the history of the country (including its relationship with the United States) and the history and goals of CEPAD.

On Monday, we traveled to San Jose de los Remates which would be the base of our operations during our stay, stopping to buy materials for the construction of bookcases for schools located in the eight communities. We stayed in the recently vacated offices of CEPAD, sleeping on mats provided by CEPAD and on rubber mattresses that we brought with us. Our “workshop” was the open air garage area of the newer offices of CEPAD located across the street. We worked solidly for the next 4 days, sawing, sanding, drilling, screwing, and nailing the bookcases together under the direction of our “crew boss” Paul Smith. None of our crew was exempt from work. We had originally intended to paint the shelves but it became clear that we did not have enough time to paint the shelves and then be able to deliver the shelves to the communities. As a result, we built all 8 shelves, delivered 5 of them to the communities and left paint for each community to paint their shelves as desired.

We had hoped to build the shelves, in part, with community members. However, the lack of power in the communities and scheduling difficulties (including the scheduling of a meeting of all eight communities in San Jose on one of the days that we were present) prevented us from doing so. We were grateful, however, to be able to meet as many members of the communities as we delivered the shelves, many of whom were people that we had met on prior occasions.

We also visited farms that were being planted and harvested according to CEPAD guidelines. Organic production and crop rotation are encouraged. Drip irrigation is being instituted to water the food crops such as corn, peppers and a variety of trees including avocado, cinnamon and cloves.

A typical day while on site included the crowing of roosters at 3:30 am. On the

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dot. That was followed by horns of busses traveling through San Jose announcing the first bus to Managua at 4:30 am, the school bus at 6:00, and the second bus to Managua at 6:30 am. Interspersed with the sounds of the horns were the clip-clops of the horses—the preferred method of transportation in this region. We got up no later than 6:30—always laughing about the sounds of the night. Meals were cooked for us by a relative of a CEPAD employee; we enjoyed beans and rice 3x/day. We worked practically nonstop during our workdays and each of us learned skills that we never thought we'd ever possess.

We maintained a journal throughout the week and most of our group participated. The journal became a “tool” for each of us to record our thoughts, our laughs and our plans for the future. Tavo Webb used the journal to record bits of wisdom from Lal—which were a source of much humor for us all. We also asked members of CEPAD to note their comments. The following is a part of one of Paul Smith's comments recorded in the journal regarding the “unexpected” happenings of the trip:

“1. How much we would laugh—like most all day every day. Laughter over silly jokes—our own inadequacies, the seeming 100+ roosters awakening us at 3:30 am, the neighbor's pigs squealing any time over scraps of food, the ear drum busting horn blast from the 4:30 am bus or the rice and beans served at every meal. Even the CEPAD workers made note of how much we laughed.

2. How important Lal led devotions and prayer would be. We not only looked forward to those times—we requested them. We opened our hearts and minds to each other during devotion time.

3. Isolation—how very isolated the farms and tiny communities are— isolated by both distance and difficult at best, roads with walking and horseback being the predominant modes of transportation.

4. Connections—the connections we were able to make with CEPAD and the communities they serve.

5. Team—that we would become—not 10 individuals working on a

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project in a foreign country—but one. One looking out for group members, one praying to God, one building bookcases, and one learning to be both Presbyterian and patient.

6. That leads me to #6. Patience. Patience is not one of my virtues. I hate grocery shopping. It's not the shopping act I dislike—it's waiting my turn in the checkout line. Nicaragua offers only two choices—go insane or be patient—be patient with the uncountable number of changes of plan, be patient waiting for the 3 pm event that eventually happens at 5 pm, be patient over supplies necessitating changes in construction plans, be patient with the speeches and translation.

7. The young men on our team. Who knew the Webb boys were actually men? Perhaps Lenore did. They never complained—not about the food to which they were unaccustomed, not about the old people's early to bed, early to rise methods, not about cold or no showers, not about my oft-repeated instructions on use of power tools. They did not even use the, worse than words, roll of the eyes.

8. Tears. I did not expect to shed tears. I teared when Oscar, rather than saying what every teen who has ever been on a mission trip says, said, "I will remember this for the rest of my life." I teared when Belky spoke of her observation of and talks with the women at the Thursday meeting community members at CEPAD. She said the women saw us—men and women—working side by side building bookcases. They saw it was possible for women to do more than keep house, cook, and raise children. They could and wanted to learn other skills—Nicaraguan traditional "mans' work."

9. Lal. Sure I knew Lal was joining us on the trip—but as our spiritual leader. I never expected him to sand, drill, cut, rout and assemble. I thought pastors read, prayed and preached. His was not token work. He outworked all of us. He is, I believe, the only young man about whom I ever said, "He reminds me of my sons." You see, my sons and I can work together with each seeing where we are and where we are going. Verbal communication is unnecessary when we work together.

Come to think of it, #9 brought tears to my eyes also. " (Paul Smith)

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On what we learned and what we need to do going forward:

{Comments 1 – 4 were written by Richard Lord in the journal}

1. CEPAD is working on process changes for the eight communities in the area that First Pres will be working in—trying to change the living conditions and empower the people to incorporate the changes into their lives.

2. The 5-year structured relationship between CEPAD and the eight communities is ending this year. CEPAD will continue to provide support and maintain their office in San Jose de los Remates. The communities are fearful about their future and uncertain how the transition will impact them.

3. As First Pres determines its future relationship with CEPAD and the eight communities, it would be helpful to interface with organizations that have formal and informal agreements with CEPAD. What support is needed? Do we continue to support the ongoing initiatives or work with the eight communities to determine their needs and direct our efforts accordingly?

4. I believe CEPAD is doing effective work and the people in the eight communities want the work to continue. With a controlling government, CEPAD has to walk the line and still get work done. I believe that First Pres should continue working with CEPAD and move into a formal partnership. Our group was warmly received by the people who are living in poverty beyond what you can imagine until you are there. First Pres needs to step into the gap as CEPAD steps back and continue to help the people during the transition to show that they can be successful on their own. We need to interface with the eight communities to find out what they need rather than us thinking we know best. [Comments from Richard Lord as recorded in the journal.]

Other considerations going forward:

5. Assess the communities' specific needs as conveyed to us by the communities.

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6. Determine the specific school needs and ways in which the communities want us to assist.

7. Determine the interactions among CEPAD. The communities, and First Pres after the 5 year CEPAD commitment ends.

8. Assess and work with team members' various strengths, weaknesses and skill levels.

9. Encourage youth participation.

10. Explore best practices among CEPAD delegations and partners (by hosting a conference?)

And, finally, Karen Walter spoke to the purpose of mission and recorded her thoughts in the journal as follows:

"I did some reading this afternoon. I am reading a book called *Keeping Heart on Pine Ridge* by Vic Glover. I met Vic Glover in September 2012 when I was on an Indian Reservations tour. On page 84, Vic writes: 'It's scary, that Commitment. It's a big step. It's not something one does to say you've done this in your life. It's something that changes your life.' That's the way I feel about mission."

The Nicaraguan Mission Team feels that its goals of beginning to establish a friendship and ongoing relationship with the eight communities were accomplished. We hope to continue this relationship and will begin discussions regarding a mission trip in the winter of 2015, again coinciding with the Ann Arbor area school winter break.