

Nicaragua Mission Trip Report
“Para Aprender, Para Construir, Para Entender”
“To Learn, To Build, To Understand”
April 2-10, 2016

Participants: Downs Herold, Marti Wendler, Tim Wendler, Susie Reynolds, Kate Drinkwater, Ginny Bell, Charlie Rogers, Luke Rogers, Melissa Anne Rogers, Thomas Halloran, Paul Smith and Carol Smith

Lead by: Carol Smith

How did we prepare? After our group of 12 was set we had orientation meetings on February 14 and March 13. We discussed health and safety, packing, cultural awareness, travel logistics, devotions/reflections, “tool school” and workplace safety. We met again on March 20 prior to being commissioned at the 11:00 service.

Where and why did we go? Following last year’s trip to San José de los Remates the Nicaragua Mission Team decided to allow Justin Sundberg and CEPAD to direct us to a new community with the hope of a long term relationship and partnership. Last fall, Fabio Rojas, the CEPAD regional director in Pantasma discussed our visit with the local leaders who proposed the possibility of reconstructing a classroom for 5th and 6th grade students. The materials budget was reasonable and the project provided the opportunity to work shoulder to shoulder with the locals. Having our project based at the school also allowed us to spend time with the kids, teachers and local leaders. This led us to Quebrada Honda (Deep Ravine), a tiny community about 40 minutes from the bustling town of Santa María de Pantasma which is about 3-4 hours north of Managua, depending upon traffic and stops. One of the benefits of Quebrada Honda is that the school seems to be the center of community life. There are homes and farmsteads all within walking distance of the school.

Who led us along the way? Our on-the-ground leader was Justin Sundberg, a PCUSA mission co-worker assigned to CEPAD. The amount of planning required to host a delegation is tremendous and Justin really pulled it all together. We were accompanied by David, a translator under contract with CEPAD. He became a valuable member of our team not only translating but working alongside us and participating in devotions and reflections. We also got to know three young women (Olivia, Megan and Stephanie) from the Reformed Church of America as they spent two days with us in the community. Olivia is currently raising support to be assigned to CEPAD as an RCA mission co-worker. Our bus driver Luis safely, albeit a little fast at times, transported us for the week. He and our teens became close buddies in spite of the language barrier.

Trip Objectives:

1. To begin to get to know the community (and its leaders) of Quebrada Honda in Pantasma.
2. To serve, working alongside the community to build the walls of a new school room.
3. Discern whether, from FPC’s perspective, a partnership with CEPAD (Pantasma region, Quebrada Honda) makes sense.
4. To spend time outside of the community to get to know the region and Nicaragua, her peoples, histories, economic situation, etc.
5. To continue the development and implementation of inter-generational mission trips at FPC.

How we spent our time:

Saturday: Arrived in Managua at 8:30 pm without incident and were met by Justin. We stayed at CEPAD’s Nehemiah Guest House in Managua.

Sunday: After breakfast and devotions we had a brief orientation about CEPAD. We visited a small fair trade store, Hope in Action. After lunch we had a fascinating Nicaraguan history lesson with Professor Aynn Setright. We took a brief tour of Managua, made a quick run to the grocery store and spent time at the new boardwalk along Lake Managua. Dinner. Reflections. Review of the week’s schedule. It was Paul’s birthday so we celebrated with cake and singing!

Monday: Breakfast. Devotions. Left for Pantasma with lunch along the way. Played games and got more acquainted with one another. Met Fabio Rojas who told us about CEPAD's work in the area. Explored the town and checked into Hotel Surgorka. Very excited to have beds and showers! Dinner. Reflections. Planning for Tuesday.

Tuesday: Breakfast. Devotions. Drove to Quebrada Honda where we were welcomed by the community leaders, students, teachers and construction crew. The lead builder was Julio. This was the big day for cutting and laying concrete blocks. Anyone interested used the power saw and our Nicaraguan friends were eager to use it as well. Other team members jumped right in and began painting the exterior of the existing classrooms. There was plenty of time to play soccer and Frisbee. We ate lunch each day in the community at Norma's house. It was always delicious and plentiful. We were grateful for showers before dinner and having access to the cyber café down the street to keep in touch with everyone back home. Reflections after dinner and early to bed.

Wednesday: Breakfast. Devotions and returned to the community. More concrete block work. Continued making rebar reinforcements for concrete and more painting. Marti taught a lively Michigan geography class to about 50 students. Ginny distributed coloring books she had created so they would remember what they learned about Michigan. Kate read books to the children in English and they in turn read to her in Spanish. There was always time for soccer with the kids. Back to hotel for showers, exploring the town, dinner and reflections. Planning for our last day in the community.

Thursday: Breakfast and devotions before returning to the community. 7 team members went to José's home to see his family's garden of trees provided by CEPAD. The rest of the group finished painting the interior of one of the existing classrooms. At our farewell ceremony the children sang and danced for us. We also sang and maybe one of us danced with the locals! We were honored to have the vice-mayor in attendance. The teachers, parents and leaders expressed gratitude for our work and for being the first group from North America to visit their tiny community. One of the cottage industries in the area is piñata making. We were honored to be part of the festivities as two beautiful piñatas filled with candy were, with Luke's help, unceremoniously smashed! Norma made another delicious lunch that we shared with the community leaders and construction workers. We spent time after lunch discussing the future: the community's and FPC's hopes and dreams. Our plan to have a bonfire and s'mores was abandoned since it was so hot the chocolate had melted into a gooey mess. After goodbye hugs and kisses we returned to our hotel, explored town, ate dinner and reflections. Our teens played a pick-up game of soccer with local kids in the street in front of the hotel. Great fun!

Friday: After breakfast and devotions we said our good byes to Justin who went back to Managua and we departed for Granada with David. Lunch was along the way and we arrived in Granada midafternoon. Our two nights at Hotel los Chilamates were a real treat complete with air conditioning, hot showers and a beautiful pool. If we thought it was hot in Quebrada Honda, it was much hotter in Granada, hovering around 100°! We had a lovely dinner as a group before returning to the hotel for reflections.

Saturday: The team decided that a North American breakfast at Kathy's Waffle House was in order before we went on a boat tour of the Isletas in Lake Nicaragua. The afternoon was free. Before dinner we were led in worship and communion by Melissa Anne. At dinner we met with jewelry maker Roberto Corrales who delivered our order of 50 pairs of earrings. It is always nice to see Roberto and catch up with news of his family. After another terrific dinner we returned to the hotel for our awards ceremony...always great fun! Early to bed.

Sunday: Very early wake-up for 4:00 am departure for the airport. Other than being a bit rushed making our connection in Houston, our travel home was uneventful and all of our luggage arrived with us.

What went well: This was possibly one of the best mission trips I've been on and I've been on a few and led a few. We had a great multi-generational team. Seven of us were returning to Nicaragua and five were visiting for the first time. I feel like a broken record when I say there was almost no drama. No one got hurt more than a few cuts and scrapes. A few folks had minor GI discomfort. Everyone was respectful of one another. Strangers became friends. Friends became better friends. Everyone participated in activities, devotions, reflections and work. As always in Nicaragua, practicing patience and flexibility can be a challenge but our team really stepped up which made for a wonderful experience.

Spending time in Quebrada Honda, working side by side with the people we came to serve was critical to the success of our trip. Unlike previous trips where we moved from community to community, returning each day to the same place with the same people really helped us to begin understanding their hopes and dreams especially related to education for the children.

The construction workers were very patient with us as we learned their particular building techniques. Even though the building was far from completion when we left, we felt very reassured it will be finished and its progress monitored by Fabio.

Again, Melissa Anne was a rock star when she planned and led us in daily devotions/reflections, worship, music and communion. The spiritual component of a mission trip is essential and with Mel's leadership and guidance it was especially meaningful. We sang, we prayed and we worshiped in a beautiful country so different from our own.

We shared a journal again this year. There are so many wonderful things written in it: impressions, feelings, descriptions, gratitude and much more. Ginny's emoji stickers were a huge hit! Other than the common theme that it was HOT, there were no real complaints.

Again, we were blessed to have Justin Sundberg as our delegation leader. His attention to detail and his genuine concern for our wellbeing truly made our experience remarkable. He was always willing to adjust the schedule when we thought we were over-booked. We look forward to the Sundberg family visit to FPC in June!

Fabio Rojas, the regional director for CEPAD in Pantasma is a very kind and humble man who loves the people he is serving. We feel very confident that he will monitor the progress of the school as well as assisting us as we move forward in our relationship with Quebrada Honda.

We saw God in many people and places. We were struck by the stark landscape, as the dry season nears its end and more pronounced by several years of prolonged drought. As we climbed the mountains it became green and lush and refreshingly cooler. It was fun to see cities and towns of all sizes and description as we stopped for lunches. It is impossible not to feel a sense of hope in this very poor country. It is impossible not to see God in the faces of our brothers and sisters of Nicaragua.

What might we do differently?

- It was hot! April is the hottest month of the year in Nicaragua. We'd like to plan our next trip in February, 2017 during the AAPS winter break. We will check on those dates.
- We would like to spend more time in the community which means less time in Managua and/or less time in Granada. Five days in Quebrada Honda would be ideal. We could do our heavier work before lunch and lighter work or other relationship building activities in the afternoon.
- Our "hotel" in Pantasma was great for some of the team and not so great for some of the team, it all depended upon which floor one was assigned. It was very hot and noisy on the first floor. It is not likely that there is another option for lodging but going when it is cooler would certainly make the stay better.

Did we meet our goals? It is safe to say that we met and perhaps exceeded some of our goals. Again, the inter-generational mix of the team was energizing. We were able to spend meaningful time with the people of the community. It is always helpful when to learn more about the incredible history of Nicaragua and its people. We actually worked alongside of Nicaraguans to cut and lay concrete blocks, mix mortar, construct rebar frame work and to paint.

God is good and we are thankful beyond words that we traveled safely and achieved our goals under His ever watchful presence.

Carol Smith