



Disciples minister to the least of these in Nicaragua



BY ROGER RAY

By most accounts, Nicaragua now holds the dubious distinction of being the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The mountain region around Matagalpa, where the struggling Central American coffee industry has left more than 90 percent of the people unemployed, is the poorest region in that very poor country.

When Hurricane Mitch, the worst natural disaster to hit the Americas in 200 years, wiped the bridges and roads out of coastal Nicaragua in 1998, I became active with an American-based Nicaraguan aid agency called the Rainbow Network, which collaborates ecumenically with both churches and charitable foundations. But it was not until 2003, when we got word of spreading starvation in the mountains, that our church members first made our way up into Matagalpa.

Traveling north out of Managua on the Pan American Highway for about an hour, you turn right, through the roadside produce stands of Sébaco, and the world quickly changes. Enterprising young men hold out parrots they have caught in the jungle to sell for pets. Others hold out wriggling iguanas by their tails — for dinner, not for pets. Many more desperate men and children stand in the road holding shovels and reaching out their hands, begging for coins in payment for having filled a pothole with loose dirt and gravel. The next two hours of driving are more pothole than pavement, in spite of the efforts of hundreds of the poor who dot the road with shovels in hand.

The haunting lyrics of Bruce Cockburn's Nicaraguan CD, *Stealing*



A produce market in Sébaco.

Fire, accompanied us off the road and down the dirt jungle trail, accessible only to a four-wheel-drive truck in the dry season. By summer, only a fearless driver would risk this muddy trail on anything but a horse. Cockburn's lyrics, "Dust and diesel rise like incense from the road," sang a description of our journey deep into the jungle to visit the tiny village of Hilapo Dos.

After raising money — with generous help from Disciples' Week of Compassion — and making several trips to help build more than 200 houses in the villages of Matagalpa, the board of National Avenue Christian Church voted to become the first church in a new program linking a

single congregation to a single village. I asked to be partnered with a village that really needed us. I think we got what we asked for and more.

Our \$20,000-per-year of support provides for the operation of a feeding center, where the 80 children who live in Hilapo Dos are fed every day. It provides scholarship support for the eight students we're sending to high school, and for the elementary school where the younger children receive afternoon instruction to supplement the morning-only school provided by the Nicaraguan school system. And our support provides the capital for a community banking program that makes small loans to help start family businesses to increase the incomes of these mostly unemployed and malnourished people.

Our pledge also provides for the twice-monthly visits of the Rainbow Network's physician, Candido Rios. However, as we discovered last spring, several of the village's 250 residents were in need of special surgery.

A ten-year-old boy named Harvin had a growth on his foot and could not walk. Deyanira, an eight-year-old girl, was going blind. A woman needed thyroid surgery; a child with a serious facial deformity needed plastic surgery; a deaf child needed tuition to attend a special school for the hearing impaired. Even in Nicaragua such needs take about

Children line up at the feeding center in Hilapo Dos.





Dr. Candido Rios with a patient. His work in rural Nicaragua is subsidized by the Rainbow Network.

\$3,000 to solve ... an amount raised in special gifts in a single worship service of the American congregation that promised to love this Nicaraguan village.

But, there are problems that will take time to address. For instance, we visited the home of Santos' family. Santos and his wife, along with their eight children, live in a one-room shack with a dirt floor. A cooking fire smolders constantly in one corner; in another corner lie boards, where some of the children can sleep off the dirt floor, which turns to mud during the six months of the rainy season — mud mixed with the droppings of chickens who wander in and out of the door-less structure.

During the six months when they cannot catch rainwater, the family must walk 150 yards down a steep mountainside to the *ojos de agua* (the eye

of water), which collects in a little muddy basin from a spring, and carry the water back up the hill. Their toilet is a hole in the ground behind the shack. Clearly, we need to dig a well here. There needs to be a sanitary latrine.

But as we were leaving, Santos pulled me aside to ask a special favor. He asked if I could get a guitar for him, so that he could teach music to his children. Music can make the difference between simply fighting for survival and feeling like a real human family.

My search of the shops of Matagalpa, an hour's drive out of Helapo Dos, produced no musical instruments. But we send trucks loaded with essential supplies to Nicaragua every few months. The truck I helped load last spring carried eight guitars, donated by church members who have given up on their own music

lessons and are willing to let villagers in Nicaragua give it a try. One has Santos' name on it. The others will go to other families. I'm working on the well; that's more complicated. But in the meantime, there should be more than hardships in this family's life. There should be the sound of music.

National Avenue Christian Church has responded to the needs created by natural disasters — the Asian tsunami, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, earthquakes, and tornadoes — but the crisis of poverty is the everyday nightmare that exacts a toll from the poor of the world as if there were a silent tsunami every day. We want to do more than react to natural disasters. We want to take positive action through growing friendships to enable our friends in Central America to have a better life and to be able to help their neighbors escape the violence of poverty.

At this writing, I'm packing to return with a team of 14 church members. We're taking a small elementary library to the school in Hilapo Dos, and I'm going to work with community leaders in selecting a site to begin building more substantial homes with year-round access to safe water. We hope to begin construction in the summer.

We at National Avenue are looking for other congregations who would like to explore a relationship with a Nicaraguan village such as the one we now enjoy with Hilapo Dos. ■



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