

“Meet Me In Managua”

[SLIDE...] "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:31-40, NIV)

At the end of April Nancy Phelps and I joined with three other people from a church in Springfield for a trip to Nicaragua. We'd been invited to go to see firsthand what an organization called the Rainbow Network was doing in that country. I saw things that touched on the extremes of emotions. Things that were heartbreaking in a way that made you want to turn away and forget what you were seeing. And at the same time, sometimes in the same minute, I saw things that brought deep joy and hope.

Today I want to help you see through my eyes and through the eyes of Nancy Phelps, what we witnessed in the remote rural parts of Central Nicaragua. But first the question, why there? Why Nicaragua? There are several answers to that question. First, all of life is about relationships--the intertwining of our lives with the lives of others. A man I was ordained with became involved in the Rainbow Network and through our association, our relationship, Janet and I were invited to support Rainbow. Through my relationship with Mark Statler my connection with Rainbow was strengthened. Hearing Mark's stories over the years and seeing his pictures built a bridge from here to there, from my heart to the hearts of people in a country I'd never seen. Mark has been to Nicaragua 3 times. And when Mark arrived here at Saint Paul's last year, he brought those relationships, and what he'd seen of the people of Nicaragua with him. So the answer to the question, "Why Nicaragua?" is partly because of relationships, bridges that have been built.

Another part of the answer is the need. Nicaragua is the poorest Spanish speaking country in the world. It's the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Haiti is the poorest. Jesus had a heart for the poor and he calls us to have his heart beating in our chests. We should be drawn to help the poor here in Joplin, around the U.S. and in the world. Nicaragua is just a 2 hour flight from Dallas, so it's close to us, but it is another world.

Here are a few facts and figures. **[SLIDE: List the following stats as I mention them.] Nicaragua is a country of 5.5 million people. 3 out of 4 people in Nicaragua live on less than 2\$ a day. The average yearly income is \$495. Average yearly inflation is 26%. 3 out of 4 children are malnourished. Unemployment is over 50%. 1 in 1,000 kids go to high school.**

Another good question to ask is, **[SLIDE...] "Why is Nicaragua so poor and struggling so much?"** That has a lot to do with its history. As a country it takes its name from the largest tribe of indigenous people. But it was colonized by the Spanish in 1522, and won its independence from Spain over 300 years later in 1838. Since that time there has been very little stability, many tyrannical leaders, assassinations and corruption. The Somoza family took control in 1936 by executing the president at the time, Augusto Sandino. "The Somozas ruled Nicaragua with an iron fist, reducing its dependence on banana exports, exiling political foes, and amassing a family fortune."

In 1979 Sandinista guerrillas launched an offensive and the ruling Somoza fled the country. The U.S. stopped sending aid in 1981 causing more unrest, hunger, and corruption. Later that year, Nicaraguan guerrillas known as "Contras" began a war to overthrow the Sandinistas. That was a bloody time and the

people still show the wounds of that time of war. Hands cut off with machetes, legs blown off with landmines, entire families killed for supposedly supporting one side or the other.

Finally other Central American countries in the area worked hard to stop the fighting and in 1990 elections were held. Since then leadership has changed several times. More corruption, more anger, more hunger.

Then in 1998 hurricane Mitch hit with tragic results. 9,000 people were killed. 2 million people were left homeless. The economy was devastated. More poverty, more hunger, more tragedy.

Over the last 500 years Nicaragua has been used by other countries for its gold, its bananas, its coffee. And every time the world economy has shifted, it has left the poor of Nicaragua even more vulnerable. Fruit was one of the primary exports in the 1,800's then the bottom fell out of the fruit market. Then coffee became the primary cash crop, and then the bottom fell out of the coffee market. A lot of coffee production moved to Asia where it's easier to grow and harvest. Each shift like this hit the poorest of the poor in the rural areas of the country. Each time there was political unrest, foreign corporations fled, and investment capital dried up.

Most of the people in the rural areas live on plantations. They do not own their own land, they do not own their own homes. When a plantation is sold, the people that live on that plantation are a part of the transaction. We would call it a form of slavery. Many of the areas we saw are still producing coffee and the people that live in the villages on the plantation all pick coffee when it's in season—every man, woman and child. But only one member of the household is paid. Very few people know how to grow crops for food, they just know coffee. Most people survive on beans and rice that they buy each day to feed their families.

Medical care throughout the country is very poor and is almost non-existent in the rural areas. And when a father or mother in a family gets sick, the whole family suffers, especially the very young. The pastor from Springfield that we traveled with said that in one area he visited 12 children had died of starvation related diseases the month before.

Things we take for granted here, not giving a second thought, are life-threatening there. A scratch gets infected and a man loses an arm or leg. Drinking water is often hard to get. **[PICTURE: a spring]** This is a source of water for several families. They call it a spring, we would call it a puddle. It's impure and is a source of parasites for many people--parasites that weaken them and make them more vulnerable to illness. Children have to work very hard from a young age and suffer from damage to their legs, backs, feet. Hernias are common in kids because they work carrying heavy loads from such a young age. They suffer from things more common to adults in the U.S. than children—back injuries, foot injuries, hernias.

Housing in the rural areas was one of the most eye-opening things. Here's a picture of a typical house. **[PICTURE: house 1]** It's usually one or two rooms made of whatever materials are available. Wood, mud, sticks, bamboo, tin if they can afford it. Most roofs are just sheets of black plastic. In one corner of every house is a kitchen. **[PICTURE: typical kitchen]** The burn wood they cut from the forest and keep a smoldering fire going all the time. The fire is just in the corner and there is no chimney. The smoke circulates through the house and the children suffer from respiratory problems from breathing it. Most houses have 8 or 10 people living in them, and they almost always sleep on the packed dirt floor. We toured 6 or 7 homes **[PICTURE: a rare bed]** and this is one of the few beds we saw. Several children slept on this bed every night. No pillows, no blankets. One ongoing problem is rats getting in to the homes, eating food and leaving behind feces causing more health problems.

I'm sure all this is hard to get your head around. It's hard for me and I was there to see it first hand. Like I said, it's only 2 hours away from Dallas, and yet it's another world. But that's the state of life for most people in Nicaragua. It was very hard to see, but we also got to see the hope, the life, and real possibilities of overcoming.

A man by the name of Keith Jaspers from Springfield became very successful in the hotel business in Branson. He was on the board of Habitat for Humanity and that led him to Nicaragua and from there his faith in Jesus Christ led him to do something about the poverty that he witnessed there. Through his leadership, his

contacts in the business world, his straight-forward appeals to people, the Rainbow Network has grown to now include 6 networks that each include up to 15 villages.

Each network targets four areas. Nutrition, Healthcare, Education, and Economic development. And when those are in place then they begin to help build homes. The genius behind Rainbow is that each area has to invite Rainbow in. The clusters of villages choose leaders to form a community committee and they invite Rainbow in and in the process they commit to providing volunteers for the four areas. When Rainbow goes into a cluster of villages it sets up all four areas as quickly as possible. The first is a feeding station. **[PICTURE: feeding center Hilapados]** This is the feeding center at Hilapados. There are 136 feeding centers so far. Each network will have several feeding stations. **[PICTURE: feeding center food]** 10,000 children **[PICTURE: kids eating]** are fed one nutritious meal each day, 6 days a week. That may not sound like a lot, but it moves children from being malnourished to getting what they need to be healthy and grow physically and mentally.

Rainbow also sets up schools in each network. The government has schools in the rural areas but these schools don't have any supplies—no books, no paper or pencils, nothing. Rainbow sets up schools and provides teachers and supplies. **[PICTURE: school in Los Rosas]** This is the Rainbow school in Las Rosas. This education is free and makes a huge difference is equipping children with the basis of reading, writing and math to prepare them to make a difference in their communities.

One of the most transforming things that Rainbow does is provide scholarships to kids to go to high school. Typically only 1 in 1,000 kids are able to go to high school simply because of the cost and the distance they have to travel to get to a high school. But Rainbow is able to help hundreds of kids get a higher education. **[PICTURE: scholarship students Los Rosas]** These are the scholarship students we met in Los Rosas. Most go to high school on the weekends and are in the village through the working for their stipend. Some work as health workers, teaching people in the villagers about clean water and health care. Many of them teach the younger children in the schools.

As the feeding center and scholarships are set up, a clinic is set up. Now, understand that no buildings are built. They use homes or just meet under some trees. **[PICTURE: clinic in Los Rosas]** This is where the doctor comes each week in Los Rosas to see patients—it's a mud and stick building. There are 8 doctors in the Rainbow network and they see 4,000 patients a month. Their yearly salary is \$5,000. I had the chance to visit with this Doctor, Dr. Candido. He travels around in a beat up jeep to get to the most remote places. He carries his supplies in a big Rubbermaid tub, and has a lot of success stories to tell. He is able to stop many diseases before they take lives; Dr. Candido is able help people of all ages to heal and be healthy.

A fourth thing that Rainbow does is set up community banks. Again, it's the people of the villages that run the bank and make micro loans. Micro loans are very small loans by our standards, \$100-200, but that can allow a family to start a business. **[PICTURE: dressmaker]** This woman was unbelievably industrious. With her first micro loan she bought a sewing machine and fabric and began making dresses that she could then sell in the city. She paid off that loan and took out another to buy goats and build a pen. She's raising the goats to sell. Others get loans to set up small stores, or buy pigs, or buy and sell grain. They have to put up collateral and each loan must be paid off before a next round of loans can be made in a community. This involves the whole community. If a loan is defaulted, the community has to step up and pay it off so that other loans can be made. Almost 2,000 loans have been made helping people become self-sufficient.

The final area that Rainbow helps with is housing. **[PICTURE: finished house]** A concrete house with a tin roof that keeps out the rain and rats costs about \$2,000. An entire village works on a group of houses with everyone helping out, not knowing which house will be theirs. When all the houses are complete they have a drawing for which family gets which house. So far almost 500 houses have been built. Never in their wildest dreams do these people believe they'd live in a house with a cement floor and metal roof, let alone own that house and the land it sits on.

We had a cookout at our house this past week for the choirs and as I grilled burgers Chuck Owens told me he'd heard about a grill that cost \$10,000. My response was, "That would build 5 complete houses in Nicaragua."

Each network has a doctor, an education coordinator, a health coordinator, a community bank coordinator, and a director—all of them are Nicaraguans.

Rainbow is efficient, effective, accessible and living out its mission in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact its mission is simply this: **[SLIDE: “Rainbow’s Vision is to...”] Reduce poverty and suffering among God’s people through a self-help, Christian partnership.** Rainbow is not offering a handout to people, it offers them a hand up out of poverty. Right now Rainbow reaches about 40,000 people among the 6 networks and when Rainbow is invited in to an area it literally changes lives for generations to come.

All this leads us to the big question: So what? What can we do? The Rainbow Network has asked Saint Paul’s to sponsor the village of Los Rosas. The cost to sponsor a village is \$20,000 per year. That provides schools, teachers and supplies for children and scholarships for high school students. That provides for feeding stations so that children, expectant mothers, nursing mothers, and the elderly get one nutritious meal a day 6 days a week. That provides a doctor and medical supplies. That \$20,000 also provides micro loans to help people break their cycle of poverty by starting businesses for themselves.

That’s a stretch for us as a church, but it’s a challenge that I believe we can meet. The leadership of our church is thinking and praying about whether we will adopt a village right now, and you can help that decision making process by stepping up and increasing your giving to support this. One single mom in our church has already stepped up. Weeks ago she made a sacrificial gift of \$200 and laid the out the challenge to the rest of us.

Inside your program today is an envelope and you can do a number of things with it. You can write a check to put in there today. Or you can make a one time commitment that you give toward later, or you can make an ongoing commitment. \$33 per year feeds one child a nutritious meal each day for an entire year. \$25 per month sends a student to high school—that includes their tuition, supplies and travel costs. Whether or not we adopt a village, we can make a difference.

Mother Teresa once said, **[SLIDE...] “We cannot do big things, but small things, done with great love will change the world.”** So we’re called to do what we can. Jesus said, **[SLIDE...] “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48, NIV).** Some of us have been given much and our faithful response is to give much in return to those who have so little. Jesus’ heart was clearly bent toward the poor, and as we choose to follow him, we bend our hearts in the same direction.

When we took a very long, winding, bumpy, at times treacherous road to Los Rosas, we arrived and were greeted by the entire village. Dr. Candido was there and one of the first things he did was to introduce us to people with special medical needs. This boy, **[PICTURE...] Reina** has a tumor on his foot that’s growing, and painful, and must be removed. Surgery will cost about \$300. This boy, **[PICTURE...] Marlou**, is 16 and has a severe hernia. Surgery will cost about \$600. This woman, **[PICTURE...] Justina**, is about 70, she also has a severe hernia that is causing digestive problems. Her surgery will require a special implant and will cost around \$1,200. This boy, **[PICTURE...] Marcos**, is 11 and is suffering from anemia. He needs special tests to diagnose him—an ultrasound, a CAT scan, blood tests which will cost around \$450. I met these and several other people who need special medical attention. The cost for all of these special needs is around \$5,000.

Dr. Candido didn’t beat around the bush. He asked me point blank if we as a church would pay for these special medical needs...and without any hesitation at all I said, “yes.” I couldn’t say no because I met them and looked into their eyes. I couldn’t say no because I saw their needs in a country where survival is difficult enough when you’re healthy, let alone when you’re battling a disease or disability. I couldn’t say no because I pastor one of the most generous churches ever.

My prayer for myself, for my family and for you is that all of us would see others the way that Jesus sees them, and love others they way that Jesus loves them. That kind of love is a love that makes a difference because it is lived out.

My hope is that today marks a beginning for us as a church as we build a relationship with some of the most beautiful people, some of the poorest people, some of the warmest people I've ever met. The people of Nicaragua.

You probably know that we cannot feed every malnourished child. We cannot provide medical care for everyone's illnesses. But tens of thousands of children will eat this year, and they will learn to read and write, and they will be seen by a doctor, and people will start small business that can provide for their families because some members of our church are saying, "I can do something more than I am right now. I can step outside my world to help someone who cannot help themselves." We can't do everything, but when we do something for the poorest of the poor we are doing something for God himself. Let's prayerfully take on this challenge. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.