
Letter from Managua

by Herold Weiss

Approaching the Managua airport one night the second week of March, 1988, my wife and I could see no lights marking the city or the airport. Just before we landed, airport emergency equipment finally outlined the runway. From the airport to the capital we drove in darkness. For a week I would lead a Bible seminar for the Adventist pastors of the Nicaraguan Mission. Just a year before, in March, 1987, I had conducted a similar week-long seminar. We quickly learned some things had not changed: Wednesdays and Saturdays there was still no water.

Throughout Latin America, Nicaraguans have been known for their *joie de vivre*. No more. Today, smiles are hard to come by, outbursts of joy are out of place. The Nicaraguan people who actively fought Somoza are becoming cynics; many see no hope for the future with either the Sandinistas or the contras. Medicines and basic foods are in short supply. To get the staples of their diet—rice, beans, sugar, corn flour, and oil—Nicaraguans must get coupons from the government. Everyone told us their rations only last until the fifteenth of the month. After that they are at the mercy of the high-priced, open market. These capitalist markets and other businesses operate freely because government officials make fortunes from their share of the profits. Meanwhile, the people suffer from a revolution conducting a grand experiment and from a foreign policy fueled by President Reagan's obsession with Daniel Ortega.

Popular forms of Catholicism, receiving strength from the "communities at the base" rather than the hierarchical church, helped start the revolution and continue to provide some of the prominent leaders. Nicaraguan Bishop Obando y Bravo has opposed the Sandinistas, but Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal are two of the priests who occupy very powerful positions in the government. But not only priests are involved. Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals, have also become active partisans of the revolutionary cause. Organizations like CEPRES (Congress Ecumenico para la Responsabilidad Social) make it very clear that a genuine, prophetic Christianity must oppose capitalistic oppression and give unswerving

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commitment to the Sandinistas' ongoing revolution.

The leaders of the Adventist Nicaraguan Mission, while maintaining cordial relations with the leaders of other Protestant churches in Nicaragua, have wisely remained uncommitted to the current leadership of the revolution. True, the prophetic voice of the Church must speak out against oppression and demand justice for the poor. And certainly the policy of the United States to engage in an economic blockade and to support the violence of the contras has hurt Nicaraguans. Still, the Nicaraguan revolution itself must bear considerable responsibility for the suffering of the Nicaraguan people.

After Eden Pastora, a gallant patriot who led the assault on the National Palace that precipitated the revolution, became disenchanted with his revolutionary colleagues, extremists took over. In 1982 land reform became violent. Large country estates were seized. Military officers took all the cattle for themselves, leaving the peasants with small parcels of land without the means to cultivate them. Church properties were also savagely overrun. Bibles and hymnals were burned.

Organizations with foreign connections, including Protestant denominations, became targets. Some Adventist evangelists were harassed by the police. Everything was confiscated from the Adventist mission; the office equipment was sold for the private gain of some colonel. All records were destroyed. After a few months the buildings were returned, but the mission's files now begin with 1982.

The situation has changed in important respects since 1982. Adventists now enjoy religious freedom. Many Adventist young persons have successfully refused to bear arms, and have been given noncombatant work. Evangelistic meetings may be advertised and conducted in not only church buildings but rented halls and huge tents. Even foreign evangelists can come to Nicaragua and hold crusades. Baptisms are held constantly, and the Nicaraguan Mission is ahead of schedule in reaching its goal for Harvest 90.

Although conditions have improved, the Adventist Mission in Nicaragua continues to work against heavy odds. Right now, the whole country has only three ordained ministers. Many foreign pastors have left, and it has been impossible to get new pastors from outside Nicaragua. A pastor earning about \$250 a month in Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador is not eager to take his family to Nicaragua with all its hardships, and a

salary of about \$30 a month.

With the Nicaraguan currency almost worthless, it is impossible for poor Nicaraguan Adventists to study abroad. The Nicaraguan Mission Seminary must train the young men and women who will pastor the churches. Right now, 14 students, including four women in the first-year class, are being trained.

With so few ordained ministers, unordained workers conduct evangelistic campaigns and baptisms. Sister Martinez, an unordained bible instructor (and a mother of two), pastors two churches in Managua, including the largest church in the nation's capital. All the pastors in the mission say a bit reluctantly—Nicaragua is an unabashedly male chauvinist culture— but proudly that Sister Martinez is doing a magnificent job of pastoring their flagship church.

Indeed, precisely because of Nicaragua's economic hardships, the opportunities are great, and the world Adventist church could be doing much more in Nicaragua than it is. Although relief workers from other U.S. denominations are active throughout the country, Adventist relief work is meager. With the currency so devalued, a modest church building, made of concrete blocks, with a baptistry, and a capacity for 200 persons, may be built for \$3,000. Visiting a church built just a few months ago, I noticed three benches were still missing. I asked how much would it take to purchase the three remaining benches, and was told \$15.

Because of the flight of the middle class, many fine

properties are for sale at very reasonable prices. Adventists could and should acquire many of them now. With the help of very modest sums from individuals in the United States, the mission has been able in the last year to secure property in the hills, only five miles from downtown Managua on which to locate its secondary school. Previously, the school was 159 kilometers away from the capital and had poor water. The new property includes a hill with municipal water for drinking piped to it, an orchard with its own well for irrigation, and a mansion big enough to provide living quarters for the families of four or five teachers.

When we visited the school, we found dormitories crowded beyond belief. One hundred students had been expected, but 210 had been admitted. Every day others were turned away. Some boys had to sleep on the dining room tables. The menu every day consisted of tortillas, rice, and beans cooked in big kettles on an open fire in the patio. Sanitary facilities left much to be desired.

But the students were irrepressibly joyous. They had a special sense of community, of identity, of common goals. In Managua and other cities we felt a thick blanket of gloom suffocating everyone. Not here. The students were not innocent children. They knew the harsh realities around them. But they were able to face up to them because of their faith and eschatological vision. As one little girl said, smiling to my wife, "I came here to prepare myself for the world." The world church would do well to follow her lead.