



Discovering new sisters in Christ

Snapshots from a journey of gratitude and giving

by Renate Bishopp

IN THE SPRING of 2008 the Christian Mission committee of Lutheran Women’s Missionary League–Canada (LWMLC) put out a call for volunteers for a team to Nicaragua. Fourteen women answered, forming an amazingly compatible team, and began making plans. On November 6, 2008, we woke up in Managua, Nicaragua, in a tropical paradise.

All surroundings indicated the start of a glorious holiday. But reality soon set in as we began a journey comprising equal parts shock and awe.

To begin with, most of us were shocked at the vast amounts of trash scattered everywhere. We soon understood that a 60 percent joblessness rate provides a narrow tax base, and municipal and state services are minimal. Many men stand or sit around idly, or hold low-paying temporary jobs. Transportation for an entire family is often a single bicycle—everyone piled on at once. Housing seemed dismal, with old buildings deteriorating and vacant, newer ones made of corrugated metal, plastic

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or whatever people could scrounge together. Gorgeous old churches sit in disrepair. Dogs, chickens, cows, goats and pigs roam the streets and highways; small fires burn everywhere, polluting the air. It was hard for orderly Canadians to take in. One night we even found ourselves in the midst of a political rally, but God protected us!

On the other hand, we were constantly awed. Our first destination was a church-run feeding centre for nearly 100 children (mostly from mother-only families

displaced by the fury of Hurricane Mitch nine years earlier). Sitting around long tables, the children eagerly but quietly waited for their meal, so appreciative of the trinkets we’d brought, from balloons to pencils. Mothers and deaconesses bustled in the open-air kitchen preparing a meal of beans, rice, corn tortillas and a juice drink. Everyone seemed open to our presence and help. In exchange we had hugs, smiles, and the wonderful feeling of God’s grace in action.



In the Nicaraguan church, deaconesses teach Christian education classes to school children and provide counsel and support to the women of their communities.

The next morning, our first scheduled workshop, brought a tinge of worry that the program we’d put together might not really fit the needs of these women in their faith journey.

But again we were awed—this time greeted by a brass band, fireworks and live entertainment! (Well, a group from the States had also arrived, ready to build a couple of simple houses.)



The LWMLC team members with their newly-discovered sisters in Christ in Chinandega, Nicaragua.

The real surprise was the people: here were the poorest of the poor, women who had brought along many children, wondering what these Canadian women had to offer. Along with Bible study and tips for serving in the Church and forming a women's organization, we shared a craft, a family-life presentation, and a skit on health concerns. We shared photo albums of family and friends, explaining in bits of Spanish and apologizing that we couldn't truly listen to their concerns. An emotional crisis arose when our lunch arrived: what about all these children? Thankfully, no one hesitated to offer or make use of our leftover meals. How different from Canada!

Travelling from one location to another, we soaked in the tropical beauty of palm trees, coconuts, bananas, flowers, smoking volcanoes, the clear blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, formidable mountains and jungle—but most of all the openness of the people. The women, in all their hardship, displayed so much love, never offended by the small gifts we handed out. Small snapshots stuck in our minds: seeing white diapers draped over fences to dry, it was hard to fathom how in all the squalor they could be so clean.

Workshops expanded as we learned local needs and enthusiasms. Singing, for instance... When was the last time you thrilled over singing your national anthem?

The young deaconesses are clearly the leaders in the Nicaraguan churches, well-organized and educated.

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Their eyes lit up over the fund LWML-Canada has set up for Christian educational materials in Spanish. The pastors received us with open arms and hugs, but sadly acknowledged the absence of men in the congregations (although some men peered into windows during our workshops to take in the action). We were moved by the red and white decorations—symbolizing Canada—in the churches. We witnessed two women's confirmations. A choir of mostly young girls led worship in that church.

We enjoyed our visit to the mission centre and the sewing school in Chinandega. In the beautiful new church our spontaneous chorus echoed back as if a large choir were praising God.

Many of us are still humming the song *Candad al Señor*, (LSB 808) remembering the sights and the people. Basics that we take for granted, like electricity and clean water, were not always present, making us especially grateful for things like fans in the 30°+ weather, and for the woman who shared her restroom. We tried very hard to stay healthy, yet some became ill. Miraculously, God had provided a nurse in our midst.

We thank God that despite doubt and obstacles, He granted us this wonderful experience and we pray our presence made some small difference to the women of Nicaragua.

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