Nicaragua Jan, 4 to 13, 2012

This was the 13th trip to Latin America of an annual work and outreach team sponsored by a partnership effort of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Pacific Southwest Region, and the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. This year’s group was comprised of: Loletta Barrett, Mike Fronk, Larry Hixon, Mike Holland, Byron Johnson, Dave Neyer, Samantha Reek, Raul Rodriguez, David Roger, Ron Ury, Quinn Wildman, Erika Yzaguirre.

Jan 4: Quinn

We all arrived for our flight at 9AM from LAX, but in different ways. David left Hawaii at 4 PM the day before. Erika left home at 2 AM. Samantha and I were taking off from San Jose when most arrived at security at LAX. In San Jose I had a brief surprise. I found out SouthWest does not transfer luggage between airlines. Which means I had to wait for it at LAX, then drop it off again at American Airlines, making a tight connection tighter. Samantha and I arrived at gate at LAX after everyone else was boarded, but got on fine.

Once we left LAX, Larry started giving out money. It would cover our dinners coming and going and our entry fee into Nicaragua. However, he add to ask me who Samantha was.

We landed in MIA after our official boarding time. However, there was a 1 minute walk to the next gate and our flight had not boarded yet. Food was right next to the gate, so we all grabbed a quick bite.

We landed all safe and sound in Managua, but upon entry we had a small surprise. Inflation has hit the port of entry and it now costs $10 instead of $5 to get in. Larry gave us all $5 more later in the trip.

After we got our luggage and made it out of the airport we found our transportation bus. Old friend (to some us) Luis was there to help transport our bags to the Nehemiah Center.

We arrived at the Nehemiah Center, found our rooms, had some sandwiches to eat, then it was off bed for some tired travelers.
Jan 5: Samantha

Our first morning in the Nehemiah center, Quinn and myself started a little earlier with a nice jog through a community just around the corner from the center. Breakfast was at 7:30, a nice meal of red beans and rice, huevos con salsa, watermelon, pina, and juices, and coffee. I was impressed with our accommodations, comfortable beds, shower facilities etc.

The morning started with a group gathering with Luis our tour leader and translator. He introduced Felix whom would also be joining us on our week's journey.

We learned that we would be working in the community of Las Mesas starting Saturday, the 7th. But first, on this day, we would get a history lesson and a local historical tour of Managua. Friday, the 6th, we would then leave to go see the CEPAD farm at Cepana and stay there one night.

Around 10 AM or so we sat down in one of the classrooms to hear a talk by Aynn Setright. Aynn has lived in Nicaragua for 27 years, working as a political activist and historian and as a “study abroad” college teacher of juniors and seniors. She is originally from Rawlins Wyoming.

In 2 hours she covered a historical timeline from 1856-2011! Aynn is very passionate about Nicaragua. She made listening to this history fun and exciting.

We then finished and ate our lunch, fried fish, plantains, rice with yellow corn, and salad before heading out to the historical points of Nicaragua. We met local Global ministry couple Tim, Laura Jean and their girls Quinn and Maya. They are from Fresno, CA and have taken a position here in Nicaragua for 2-3 years. They followed us to the sites in their own car.

We drove to the look out area where Sandino’s large black silhouette statue overlooks both historical Managua, and the new Managua. The view was spectacular. Off in the distance you could...
see Lake Managua, and the cathedral. Raul, Quinn and David decided to brave the elements and rode the zipline across the lagoon. They looked like they were having fun. After they returned we walked down the steps to the Sandino monument. It was in Spanish but seeing some of the pictures of the time Sandino was around was interesting.

Due to the upcoming presidential inauguration, we were unable to tour the Cathedral in Managua, and instead went to a new Cathedral built following the 1972 earthquake.

We then stopped at a local grocery store, and then headed back to center.

Dinner was at 6PM. We then had a talk with Carlos Pachecos on How International Economics Works in Nicaragua. Most of the crops grown in Nicaragua are white corn, coffee, red beans and rice. This also was a great talk, mostly on the coffee industry and fair trade. After this we had our first reflection talk from our book “Walking Gently on the Earth”, with Mike Frulk as leader. Having had all the history and economic talks earlier was a perfect platform for our discussion.

After reflections, several of us decided to walk to a local bar for a refreshment of beer or wine. We walked to a restaurant that was still open and we got to try 2 local beers, Tona, and La Victoria.

Jan 6: David Roger

We arrived in CEPANA a little after one in the afternoon, and we met Juan Carlos, the CEPAD representative, and then we sat for lunch.

After lunch, we had an orientation briefing from Juan Carlos. He welcomed his friends from prior years and the rest of the group. He was pleased to have
visitors and the chance to give us a tour that would show those who worked at CEPANA two years ago the results of their efforts.

He told us that a primary purpose of the farm is to preserve the natural resources of the land. Tree seeds are planted in containers and once they have sprouted and reached the appropriate size they are transplanted out into the field. Because of our efforts and the new trees we have planted, we now have new animal species returning to the area. For example, we have two Howler monkeys and various Sloths that now reside on the farm. Lastly, many migrating birds are now stopping by.

Many students from the University now come here to study. This is all due to the results of our conservation efforts. Five years ago water was the problem. Now CEPANA has lots of it. We are happy that we are able to bring new animal species into the area because of this water.

Maintenance of the farm is the most expensive part of the operation and we are unable to get enough revenue from the sale of corn and beans. In order to preserve this natural resource and to provide good maintenance, the funds need to come from somewhere and the production of fruit on our trees is that source.

Juan Carlos went on to explain how they began to trap the water run off with the use of a cistern and that there is now adequate water to raise crops. He explained that the neighbor does nothing about erosion control, however the good top soil that comes in from the neighbor’s property is used for potting soil for containers for new trees.

He also talked about how they use plant grafting which promotes faster crop production. They now have twenty-five different species of fruit trees.

We toured the farm and stopped by the area where the group planted fruit trees and put up power lines. We stopped at a water tank that the former group worked on. It provides 6,000 gallons of water and it gravity feeds the showers and toilets. We then went to the main well that is 63 meters deep.
From there we went to another water reservoir, and then to a spot where they have square tanks with fish in them called Cues. This water was being used in the planting of tomatoes.

We stopped by the Cedro tree and Juan Carlos talked about the many uses of the tree. He said that a kilo of seeds from this tree is worth about $100 US dollars.

After 20 years with CEPAD, Juan Carlos is beginning to phase out his relationship with them. He will no longer be working on the farm. He will, over the next year, be focusing on developing new businesses. He will not be working with visiting delegations anymore.

The tour ended and the group remained to ask him questions about past projects and people as well as his future.

That evening, after dinner, there was a discussion led by Samantha on Chapter 3 of our book “Walking Gently on the Earth.” We discussed where food comes from, how it is produced and the need to appreciate those that grow, harvest and produce the food we eat.

We concluded our day by playing a roaring game of Hearts.

Jan 7: Byron

Early risers were greeted by a choir of a variety of birds as they greeted the dawn of a new day. That was 6:00 AM. By 7:00 our group was at the proper place for breakfast. Since we were leaving the farm, following lunch, we proceeded to load the truck with luggage.

Approximately at 9:45, our group assembled to hear from the director of the farm, Juan Carlos. He was prepared with a slide show detailing the organizational plan for the models in the Matagalpa district. To assist him, he introduced the president Dalila, the secretary, Antonio Figuere, and the supervisor of the various projects, Francisco. Ms. Dalila announced that the association had acquired a large parcel with highway frontage where their “dreams” are to build an office. She further described several projects underway including an important well with the financial assistance of the U.N. and a project to supply many houses with a new model wood burning cooking stove. A discussion was held concerning the relations with the government which has officially
acknowledged the Association with certain rights, making it easier for
the officers to approach businesses and agencies for project funds.

Little did we anticipate what was ahead of us as our caravan of
two trucks and the van left the farm after lunch. We were going to the
village of Las Mesas. Traveling along the paved highway towards
Matagalpa went smoothly, then, without notice, the lead truck turned
left off of the highway and practically disappeared, followed by pickup
#2. Our driver, Jorge skillfully drove us over the edge of the highway
onto a gravel road. The rocky road to Las Mesas had begun. Who will
forget the moments going up a steep rocky hill when the tires began to
spin and we started slipping backward? The van was overloaded and
could not handle the steep hill. We all had to get out of the van and walk
up the hill. Mesas are, by definition, supposed to be flattop mountains.
But, our road continued up and down through a series of beautiful hills
and valleys. Along the way, we saw cattle grazing and occasional horses. “Traffic”
on our road was mostly cattle being
driven to their next pasture. We began to
wonder in our leader, Carlos was on the
right road. Then, at last, the trucks
stopped in the middle of a small
collection of homes and we had arrived.

Fortunately for us, the school was closed for vacation so we were given
a large room to lay out our mattresses.
All 12 of us would be sleeping here for
our time in Las Mesas. The next step
was to see where we would eat our
meals. From the road, it was a rocky
path down a “city block”. The house
where we would eat was the home of
Silvio and his family. A simple structure,
it was typical of a two room concrete block
house in Las Mesas. The meals would be
prepared by four local women. The
“kitchen” was typical, with the “stove” a
concrete surface on which to burn firewood
for heat and water brought in with a pail
from the local tap, a couple of blocks away.
The evening meal consisted of rice and
beans, vegetables, and a portion of beef.

The long day was completed with a lively discussion led by Loletta. Half of us then retired, the other half played cards for awhile.

Jan 8: Ericka

We woke up this morning bright and early to the sound of pigs squealing, cows mooing, and a bat hanging from the rafters of our temporary home in Las Mesas. Our breakfast was at 7:00 and consisted of eggs, fruit, beans, and rice with large, homemade corn tortillas.

We were invited to see the home of Senor Rodriguez, which he was hoping to rebuild. This turned out to be a long walk down a steep path. His “home” consisted of bamboo sticks covered with dried cow dung for the walls, a dirt floor, and a corrugated tin roof. Our “help” in the next few days would be to carry concrete blocks, wood beams, and other building materials down the steep path to the home site. The plan was that sometime in the future the building process would actually start.

The home site is difficult, as water for everyday home use also has to be carried down the long path. His home did have a beautiful view of the hills and valleys off in the distance. We also met his son and daughter at his home. He had a nice garden that he had planted on a nearby hillside.

At 10:00, it was time for service at the Catholic Church. The priest arrived on horseback. It was an uplifting service with lively music. Lots of women and children attended with a few men standing in the back during the service. (Most of the men living in Las Mesas
were away from home for several weeks, cutting sugar cane in Costa Rica. It was hard for us to imagine an economic world where cutting cane for a few dollars a day, hundreds of miles from home, was somehow economically better than any work opportunities in this part of Nicaragua.) When church service was over, a piñata was hung for the children in the church courtyard. The children took turns hitting the piñata. Music was playing and children were encouraged to dance while they tried to hit it. It was a joy to watch them have such a good time with it.

The priest of the church was kind enough to let Quinn ride his horse before he left to go home. We also had the opportunity to see another house that we would work on for the next couple of days. It was at the end of the road, “main street”. This house also had a wall constructed of bamboo. The plan would be to tear down the bamboo wall and replace it with a concrete block wall. The family was home and we saw a female dog and her two tiny puppies on the property. They had been the only puppies to survive. Apparently the other pups died from the cold.

After we ate lunch together, we discussed our jobs for day. Job #1-Mike F., David R., Quinn and Luis were to carry lumber from the hillside where it had been cut to the road, where it could be loaded on the pickup truck. It was hard work and took a lot of strength from them. Job #2-Samantha and Loletta cleaned (prepared) the school exterior for paint. They also picked up trash in the school courtyard. What a difference it made. It looked great! Job#3-Byron, Raul, Mike H., Ron, David N., Larry, Felix and Erika removed the two exterior bamboo walls of the house at the end of the road. A mason had been hired to lead the job of building the new brick walls. Trenches were dug while cement was mixed in the living
room of the home. It was difficult for Erika to find a job to do, because Mr. “mason” did not feel comfortable with a woman doing a “mans” job. But the foundation was poured and concrete blocks were stacked. The walls began to go up. As the afternoon went on, Byron and Felix helped the woman of the house grind the corn for her tortillas. She was kind enough to brew coffee for Ron, Byron, Felix, Raul and Erika. It was grown locally and tasted delicious.

After a hard day, we all returned to the school to wash up and/or relax before dinner. Our last meal of the day was once again prepared by four amazing women. We had our time of discussion on chapter 5 (Global Warming) while Mike F. and David R. slept. Loletta, Mike H., Raul, David N., Larry and Erika ended the night with a great game of hearts while the others went to sleep for the night. As 11:00 came, it was time for the rest of us to hit the sack and get ready for another day of hard work.

Jan 9: Mike H

We awoke, at least I did, at 6 AM sharp today to the sounds of honking buses. The buses seldom come through Las Mesas, so folks don't want to miss out when they do. Otherwise, it can be a long walk to town, ten miles away for the local residents. Monday is a beautiful, sunny day here in Las Mesas. The folks here may be short on material possessions, but not scenery. They have a million dollar view of valleys and mountains every day. Today, we get to enjoy it too.

8 AM is breakfast, followed by our assignments for the day. I am on the crew that will continue work on building a wall for a house in the community (along with Raul, Quinn and Byron). Others will move blocks down the hill to another house to be built soon. Mike Fronk and David Roger are going to check out the local twenty year old water system, which brings water from a mountain stream two kilometers away through a one inch pipe. Remember, there are ninety families and seven hundred people in this community that share just two water spouts!
In the afternoon after lunch, we switch jobs. David and Felix go to finish the wall, others exhausted from the morning haul take a nap, while many of us continue to move 35 pound cement blocks down a 100 foot hill, then climb back up, only to repeat the process again. I counted 200 paces to make it to the top, and nine minutes for the round trip. The rocky trail is a main pathway in the village, so there’s also the dodging of cows, horses and their fresh poop. Talk about a workout; who needs Jenny Craig or your local gym when you have Global Ministries projects! We made nine trips today. Raul also enlisted the help of some local boys to assist our transport of the blocks. They were eager and happy to participate, and we were glad to pay them a small stipend for their work.

Early in the afternoon we meet with the Principal and Teacher, Ampararo Moran Mendoza, and the Preschool Teacher, Areli Mendes Morales Moran, at the school and heard about their programs and needs. Their greatest needs are for room dividers, a computer, and books. Raul and Loletta had brought toys and educational supplies, which were presented to the teachers. They were thankful for the gifts. Later in the day, paint was secured from the local town by Luis and some of us started to paint the school.

At dinner, David Roger offered prayer in both English and Spanish, which was proper, given our special guests: Silvio’s father, Senor Lopez Martinez, and the Evangelical Evangelist (Name??). Our hosts not only provided dinner for us, but sang, clapped and prayed for us in a very charismatic style. In return, we sang “This is the Day” and appreciated their sharing of faith and friendship. No one seemed to mind that rain this evening had made the ground muddy.
Our nightly group discussion was lead by Byron on chapter six, “Fuels that Fire our Engines.” Byron shared some of his own life journey and passions and challenged us to identify our own. A discussion ensued about biofuels, solar panels, and alternative and sustainable energies. Next, we shared our “Aha Moments” for that day, which included: singing with our Evangelical hosts, carrying the blocks with the neighborhood kids, finishing the wall & checking the water system. We also learned that Silvio has a degree in agriculture and teaches others for free. He truly loves his community, and we all have the utmost admiration for him and his leadership skills.

Jan 10: Loletta

It is still dark and relatively quiet except for the insects. But a rooster crows and the two calves in the yard next door begin bawling back and forth. I imagine they are saying, “Donde esta mi mama?” Where is my mommy? The farmer has taken the cows to pasture and left behind their calves to be weaned. The dark and the silence are completely disturbed by the school bus roaring down the dirt road, honking four times every few houses. It calls to everyone who takes the 1 ½ to 2 ½ hour trip to school, work, town. It is the only public transportation and the only transportation for most everyone in this village where only a few families have a horse.

The light comes in the latticework blocks and reflects off the corrugated metal roof which sits six inches above the top of the school room where we twelve missionary adventurers and our two guides sleep on worn two inch mattresses on the cement floor. A floor for which I am grateful, considering that though it is cold and hard, it is rare in a village of packed dirt floor and bamboo and mud wall houses. I think we are in the largest building in the village, two school rooms, that undivided hold ½ of the 140
children enrolled, larger than the Catholic church we worshipped in on Sunday. I wonder briefly where our driver has slept. Perhaps in the van, or perhaps he has family or friends in the village.

Our group lies in various stages- some in sweats, some with hoods on, some fully dressed, in sleeping bags, light blankets, sheets, and Byron on a cot some how “found” by our hosts, surely given up generously by someone to provide comfort for one of us. I am grateful again. I can hear snores, coughs, a quiet conversation. Some of the group begin to stir. A couple begin to walk, another stretching muscles both to start the day and to get the kinks out after the hard work we have done of hauling cement blocks or wood or digging trenches and building walls. There is no running water, no bathroom, no sanitation, no trash removal here. The road to Las Mesas is mostly rock that meanders, rises and plummets up to 3500 feet. We wonder if the unseasonable rain we had in the evenings the past two days will stop or if it will threaten our ability to leave tomorrow. Our passenger van is not equipped for this terrain- our driver, George, white knuckling, or at least whistling his way up and down steep inclines with most of us walking on the most difficult inclines- the rest sitting as weight over the wheels to provide traction. It is our last full day in the village of Las Mesas (the tables) and so it begins.

Today we plan to finish carrying the cement blocks down to the Rodriguez house. Mostly, one at a time, but a couple strong souls (and the 10-12 year old boys) two at a time. I barely make the 5 minute round trip from the pile to the top of the hill and rely on others to make the 10 minute trip down and back up the ravine. We will also attempt to finish painting at least the white (top half) of the front of the main school building with oil based smelly paint, brushes losing bristles, and a handmade ladder that broke and resulted in a fall for George. This worries us a little as he fell hard on his hand, and beyond his discomfort, we know he needs both hands to maneuver the passenger van out of here tomorrow! We also picked up all the trash around the school yard. It looks quite a bit better.

The Birds sing, the calves moo softer, and I can hear conversations in the village, the children calling and the pitter patter of their feet. I
work on putting on my shoes that are caked with mud for the unavoidable trip to the latrine. We dress and undress lying down under covers, or quickly with backs turned while others are averting their eyes, or holding up a sheet for modesty. Half way through the trip in a co-ed dormitory with one wall of lattice metal, I have given up any thought of privacy. The children come periodically to peer in at us. It feels a little zoo-like and we are the entertainment.

This morning some of us finish moving as many of the cement blocks as we can, some go first to see the finished walls of the bedroom, and some to paint the school. We actually finish the white and the blue!

At lunch time Silvio’s father has brought his horse and offers us a ride. Raul and I take him up on the opportunity and the horse moves at a rapid pace on its own down the path to the road and back again. We take a photo opportunity and Erika joins in.

In the afternoon, while some put the finishing touches on the paint, we have a presentation about the school. Silvio Lopez Moran is what I get for Silvio’s name. There is a certificate of completion for the CEPAD training on the wall of his parent’s house but I forgot to check the spelling of his name. Areli Mendez Morales Moran is his cousin. She is a 17 year old senior in high school and has been teaching preschool for three years. She teaches 5 days a week and then goes to High school on Saturdays in Matagalpa- a good twelve hour day. She is also planning to start taking a computer class on Sundays. Nernanez Torez is the Vice President of the Catholic church. Ampararo Moran Mendoza is a teacher in the school and the director of the school. She travels 1 ½ hours roundtrip from her home to the
school each day.

The school was founded in the 1980s and was originally built of mud walls in the location of the Catholic Church, so the cement block buildings with cement floors and latrines are a great improvement. The current attendance is 140 including preschool, kindergarden and elementary school. It is a poor school and some parents come in to help. They have infrastructure needs for the school- they mention needing dividers for the classroom we are sleeping in and would like to have a kitchen. Currently food is prepared and brought in from the homes. Later they will ask us if we can find a way to provide a computer so they can access the curriculum. I think about the fact that there is no running water, and wonder how long they can use the three existing latrines. They also need school supplies (the government does not provide enough and the families do not have them). There are four teachers and the children are divided into four classes PK-K, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6. Teacher training includes finishing high school and there is a special training school (not college) for three years. They follow the curriculum provided by the government.

Secondary school is available 8 km from the village- 5 km by bus and 3 km walking. The families must pay for the bus. High school is on Saturday only for the remote communities. It means several hours travel both directions and a full day of class. In the city it is 5 days a week. They gave us some statistics: 70-80% of the children finish elementary school, 40-50% of these children go to secondary school, 20% of them finish high school. I noted that none go to college.

The Catholic church supports the school by teaching Christian values. School is in session 10 months of the year from February to December. There are two weeks off in July and one at Easter. Grades are given by numbers, not letters. The children attend school from 7:30 to 12:30. In the afternoon they offer two hours of education for the adults, and just a few attend. The estimated literacy rate for the adults in the community is 48%.

They seem to have the same problems with discipline and getting parental involvement and commitment to attendance as in the United States. Generally the parents do respect the teachers. The teacher’s salary is based on their level of education- 4,000 cordovas or $180/month plus a bonus of $30-35 per month and money for transportation. It is hard for new teachers to get jobs because of the
economic situation and because the number of children is actually going down (they don’t come to school).

The teachers’ favorite part of the job is working with the children and forming them. On vacation, the teachers like to get away! Raul presented the teachers with a suitcase filled with sports and school equipment. Loletta presented some school supplies. They could have used a whole lot more!

In the late afternoon, a group went by truck to see the water well for the community. The other half of the group went to play soccer with the children. We learned that it was perhaps not the best strategy to be asking kids who have no relative sense of time or distance how far the soccer field was (40+ minute round trip)! The teams were divided into light colored and dark colored shirts. The goal posts were two trees and two hats.

The field was a cow/horse/pig pasture complete with patties. Some of the youth in the area also showed up to play. In the end, the good guys won - all of us! Walking back we realized that the children had run and played in flip flops, sandals and high heels.

Ron took up position for the best sports photo shots – right in the center of the 50 yard line. I don’t know how many pictures he actually got of the game because the children completely surrounded him to look at his camera and pictures! The children were curious about my disposable camera, I tried to explain that it was out of pictures and had to be taken home to get developed. They asked how much it cost- $5 to Ron’s $700 beauty!

In the evening after dinner we attended the Evangelical church worship service in the home of Silvio’s parents. We converted the 15 person dining space by moving out the tables and lining up the chairs. The pastor had been advised that we were tired and a 1 hour worship service would be appreciated. There were a couple of songs and he
preached on humility- John the Baptist was humble, Jesus was humble, and we have been humble leaving our families and everything behind to come and help here. It was quite complimentary and generous in gratitude. The pastor asked for volunteers to pray in pairs for each other out loud and Felix prayed for the group- all simultaneously. There were speeches of thanks from Silvio, Silvio’s mother and Mr. Rodriguez.

Our discussion group was led by Quinn and we considered the issue of population control considering the rights of reproduction contrasted with the expansion of the village from 4 families to 900 persons in only 4 generations.

Then we shared our A-HA moments
Larry- the beauty of the country and the trees with vines hanging. Also, when he saw that someone had spread blue paint all around, he asked the children and they turned in the boy, so he had him clean it all up.
Erika- walking to the soccer field was a long way to go to play and the shoes the children had to play in were flip flops and high heels.
Ron- the hard work the women had to do to cook for us- hauling water a long way, the very small space and open fire for cooking, while caring for the children and even nursing a baby- any one of those things would keep us busy enough.
Mike F- Quinn has eclipsed Larry as task master- walking back up the hill after carrying the cement block down the hill was really hard work.
Dave- talking to the teachers and what little they earn (what we paid for our trip is what the teacher gets paid for a whole year’s salary and that is only because she has 9 years of experience!)
Raul- talking with the kids on the way to the soccer field. The boy who was smoking was the one who carried three cement blocks at a time. When Raul asked why he smoked cigarettes, he said “he couldn’t get anything else/didn’t have money for cocaine,” and “it made him light headed and he didn’t have to think about things.” But in his conversation with one of the girls (who was the altar girl in the Catholic church), she was so proud of graduating 6th grade and attending her prom. She will go to 7th grade but probably not full time because it is too hard on her family for her to go to Matagalpa. She wants to be a doctor.
Quinn-kids are kids, everywhere they want to play and kick a ball around
Byron- when he was done here at the school there was a hoard of boys and a few girls running around chasing each other and engaging in horseplay as kids do everywhere. Later some of the girls came back all dressed up and were eyeballing all the things we have.

As we discussed the issues of the day it became clear that this village is a microcosm of the issues discussed in the book. In particular the issue of procreation. There were originally 4 families and now there are 900 people with the same water supply. The water table will not support the people. If we expand the flow of the water it will not help them. They will simply use the limited water faster. Is there any project we could do that would really help them if there are too many people to sustain? Some thoughts; Education in contraception, reforestation to restore the water table, and sustainable farming for less people.

Jan 11: Ron

This morning, our last in Las Mesas, was cool and clear. We had breakfast at 7:00 AM and then said our goodbyes to Silvio and our four cooks. We had started to develop a relationship with them and they were a bit teary eyed as we said our goodbyes. We tipped them and expressed our appreciation for all the hard work that they had accomplished in preparing our meals under what we would consider very primitive conditions. (The “Stove” was firewood heat on a concrete block surface, no running water, no refrigeration.) We left the school about 8:15 and started the long windy road towards Matagalpa. (Long, as it took us about an hour and twenty minutes to cover the 8.5 miles to the highway. We did stop for a tire change after the spare was knocked off of it’s mount while travelling over a particularly lumpy rock.)

Once we arrived at the highway at Matagalpa, our route took us west to Sebaco, then west/southwest, north of Lake Managua towards Leon. This route was very scenic with views of several volcanic cones. Momotombo was prominent on our left near Lake Managua, and there
was a smoking Volcano San Cristobal on our right. (Nicaragua is one of the most geologically active countries in the world. There are over 40 volcanoes in the country, six of which have been active in the last 100 years. Momotombo last erupted in 1905.)

We arrived in Leon about 12:30 and had lunch at Barbaro’s café/bar. From Leon, we continued west towards the coast and arrived at the Rancho Los Alpes lodge for our rooms for the night. This was a century old rancho that had been converted to an “Eccolodge” for tourist lodging, camping, horseback riding, etc. The owner, Alma Urcuyo, was a gracious hostess and we had a very pleasant evening at this lodge. (She opened a couple of bottles of rum and some of us probably had a better time than was good for us.)

Jan 12: David N

I woke up to the predawn serenity of Rancho Los Alpes. The rest of the villa woke to a chorus of dogs howling (again I am so-o-o sorry). We had a breakfast of fresh fruit, cereal and egg sandwiches. After breakfast, most of us went on a nature walk led by Armondo, a local naturist. The walk was mostly through a new growth, dry land forest that was cotton fields 25 years ago. The highlight of the walk was a 90 year old tree that used to be the only tree in the area.

Then we had a presentation by Alma, the owner and manager of the ranch (I could sit and listen to her all day). Rancho Los Alpes is a family owned ranch of about 170 acres that has cattle and peanut fields as well as the Eco-tourism resort. Alma studied business and eco-tourism in Spain and spent several years
working in the tourist industry in Europe before returning to Nicaragua 2 years ago to start up the eco-tourism portion of the ranch. The ranch employees about 40 local families as well as rents horses and buys milk, fruits and vegetables from local farmers, keeping as much money as possible in the local communities. They pay their workers 40 to 100 Cordobas a day, which is well above the national average of about 30. They also provide 75 scholarships so local children can attend school in the city and train local farmers in organic farming, composting, soil conditioning, etc. It is good to see Nicaraguans working hard to improve themselves and their community. At about 11:00 we loaded the truck and reluctantly left our newly discovered paradise.

After a short bus ride we arrived at Alex Bar, a beachside restaurant. They told us that lunch would be ready in an hour, so some of us went swimming; some of us just waded in the shallows, and some of us relaxed at the restaurant. We all ordered fish and it was delicious. After lunch we headed back to the Cathedral Plaza in Leon. On the way we encountered a funeral procession of about 100 people following a horse drawn hearse. We spent about an hour shopping and exploring around the plaza, including seeing the beginning of the funeral. Then we headed back to Managua and after a short stop at the supermarket to pick up souvenirs (mostly coffee and rum) we arrived at the Nehemiah Center.

We started our evaluation with Luis and soon we were told dinner was ready. After dinner we met with Laura Donaghy and Tim Tergosen, D.O.C missionaries in Nicaragua. Laura is an ordained Disciples minister and Tim has a PhD. in astrophysics. They arrived in Nicaragua about nine months ago with their daughters Quinn and Maya. Laura works with the Christian Mission
Church, about 50 unaffiliated local congregations, teaching theology to rural pastors. Their motto is “De los pobres a los mas pobre”: “from the poor to the even poorer. Tim is trying to start a pilot program of using manure to produce methane gas, reducing the need to cut down trees for fire wood. They both teach part-time at the University and, as church members, get scholarships for church members in lieu of getting paid by the university. We finished our evaluation and settled down for our last night in Nicaragua.

Jan 13: Raul

On the last day of our trip, most of us woke up at 5 a.m. and started getting ready to head out to the airport. I think everyone had finished up their packing and had completed separating the things they wanted donate and leave behind the night before. Luis, our guide, had set up some fruit, toast, juice, and coffee for breakfast as we were loading up the truck with our luggage.

The drive to the airport was very quite as it was still early in the morning. As most were recalling memories from the trip, I was drawn to the beautiful sky as the sun was rising. It made me think of the time we spent in the mountains and how grand the simplicity of God’s creation really is and how much I would miss the simple life. I also started thinking about what was awaiting me when I got back home. Back to work and the problems of my job & everyday life, and that’s when it hit me. Everyone has problems! However, it seems we in the U.S. see our problems as more important than others, problems of trying to make it in a competitive economy, trying to have a comfortable life, and trying to acquire more wealth. While the problems of some the new friends we made are a lot more severe and are more important because their problems are of survival and whether they’ll have enough food or water this year. Those are real problems, and I am very blessed and fortunate enough to say that those are problems that I have never had to face.

We arrived to the airport around 6:30, and said our good-byes to our guide and friend Luis. Everyone got through check-in with out any problems. It seems like every year some of us lose toothpaste, lotions, or other small bottles while going through gates. As we arrived at our gate, some of us walked around to get some breakfast, coffee, or some last minute gifts. To the surprise of many who have been on this trip, our check-in bags were not searched again as we boarded the plane.
We landed safely in Miami around noon. Right after we exited the plane, we had to go through customs and security. We all made it through with out any problems and some of us met a restaurant near our gate and enjoyed delicious flavorful food. From there, we proceeded to our gate where we all met up except for Quinn & Samantha. We discussed dates on when we could meet for a reunion and it was decided to meet on 2-26-12. (The reunion date was changed to March 4th after we arrived home and had a chance to check for the usual conflicts in our lives.) Our journals would be turned in by Jan., 23and to Ron. We discussed some things we would be doing when we got home to help out mother Earth. We also discussed how we might be able to help out the school with a computer. And finally, we discussed some possibilities for next year’s trip. It seemed like Nicaragua was at the top of the list.

Then we had some free time before our boarding call at 3:30 p.m. local time. Our flight would be leaving Miami at 4, and we would land at 6:50 p.m. at LAX. We all gathered up at LAX baggage claim, waited for our rides to pick us up, and said our good-byes. And we look forward to meeting up again at our March reunion and retelling our experiences and plans for how we can continue God’s mission in our communities and for our brothers & sisters in Nicaragua.

THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS: Ron

We spent several days in Las Mesas, a village in the central highlands of Nicaragua, a place where houses are of cinderblock or bamboo walls, with dirt floors, and the nearest indoor plumbing is probably an hours drive away. In this world of people living on the economic margins, life requires a great deal more effort than we experience in the USA. For example, the effort our cooks put in gathering firewood and fetching water adds several hours a day to what normally takes us a few seconds at our homes where we turn on the gas stove to cook or turn on the faucet for water in the sink. Even though we all know this intellectually, I
find that their world can be a bit abstract until I travel to their places and see their living conditions first hand.

It seems that the little bit of construction work that we did was insignificant and unimportant when compared to the overwhelming tasks of daily living they encounter every day. In some ways, their warm hospitality and appreciation of us, and our efforts on their behalf, gave me the feeling that we somehow received more than we gave. Perhaps the teary eyes of our cooks, as we said our goodbyes, tell us that we may have given them more than we realize. I certainly had that sense while taking over 150 photos and handing out prints to children that may never have had a photo of themselves before. However, I also had a sense that, while being with and relating to the children, I was receiving more than I gave.

Perhaps these thoughts about the insignificance of our efforts can be put in perspective with the thoughts from a prayer, provided by our guide, Luis, our last night in Nicaragua. Attributed to Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in El Salvador in 1980; “…It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the enterprise that is God's work. We cannot do everything, it may be incomplete, but it is a beginning. An opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest....".

Luis also offered a Franciscan Blessing, a "Blessing as you go Home". "May God bless you with DISCOMFORT! Discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with ANGER! Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice,
freedom, and peace. May God bless you with TEARS! Tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them, and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless you with FOOLISHNESS! Enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. May God bless you. Amen”

This was my 12th trip to Central America. Somehow, my experiences on each trip have been different but each trip has been very enjoyable and rewarding.