

To: Sister Parish Committee
From: Carl Scheider
CC: AKF
Date: 2007/08/09
Re: July 2007 Delegation and Conference

Introduction

These are my notes from our July trip to Nicaragua. As you know, we are not sending a delegation this year for lack of interest. You nominated 4 of us to attend an international conference on Nicaraguan Solidarity, and to visit our Sisters and Brothers in Teustepe. Two members of that community accompanied us to the conference.

It dawned on me about the 4th day that I go through the same gamut of emotions every time I visit.

1. Initially, I am excited. I get to meet old friends; I can feel and taste a different culture and language; I can learn a bunch of new things.
2. Then I get depressed – about as the first day orientation is getting under way. The problems are still here – and they are so immense. So much poverty, unemployment, etc., etc. I just want to chuck it all and go home and forget about this little part of the world. It seems like an insurmountable set of problems – and we don't even have an idea of how to help without meddling.
3. And then I start to talk with people, to meet the lovely people in Teustepe, to hear how they care for us, how they welcome us, to hear of their problems, their hopes, and remember our long history with them. And I meet their kids, and think of their future and what they could become.
4. And I recover. I get some new ideas, I find hope again. Together we can do this!

I also compiled a “to-do” list of ideas. Please review the list, and commit to participate.

Good News / Bad News.

The Good News: we have been in the forefront of this Solidarity business for 20 years. We are right up there with the best of them in trying to figure out how to do this. The Bad News is that most of them have a lot more going on in terms of physical aid – although I am still unclear on how these are sustainable projects and not charity – but they look really good. Let's get into this stuff.

Presentation

I propose to present this in this fashion:

- At the meeting, step through only a high level summary.
- Post the detailed one on my web site and give everyone a pointer to it.
- If anyone wants a copy I can also send them a PDF or a printed copy.

Summary – visit to Teustepe and Solidarity Conference 07/2007

This is a page summary of my notes. If you want to learn more about any of these, you can find the detailed notes here: <http://scheiders.com/nica.htm>.

- **Current State of the County.**
 - **Commandante Ortega** – he is a different man this time. He is being attacked from the left and right for most of his initiatives.
 - **Free Schools.** Accomplished by fiat, with no funding, very popular.
 - **Free Medical Care.** As with the first. A lack of medications is a major problem.
 - **Zero Hunger.** This is a grant of \$2,000 to 75,000 women consisting of a milking cow, a pig, some chickens and seeds. Creative, hopeful, also criticized.
 - **Citizens' Councils.** A way to get people's input and keep a watchful eye on local government, or a party dominated spy group – depending on your perspective.
 - **Reconciliation Commission.** A way to get past the Contra War and provide their pensions.
 - **Energy Crisis** – Bad and getting worse. They have about 30% of the energy they need. Bad maintenance, some corruption, lousy administration. Venezuela has committed to help, but nothing on the ground as yet.
 - **Poverty and Unemployment.** Basically unchanged.
- **AKF's status.**

Doing good. The center is a huge success, but distracts from other efforts. They are a legal partnership. They are growing the team. The FARM idea is still alive, other farm sites considered.
- **Teustepe.**

Delegates – they sent two delegates to the conference: Cora Flores and Miguel Angel ? Miguel was very impressive and contributed a great deal in various settings.

Welcome. Cultural presentation was splendid.

Letters. People are doing ok, and everyone sends hugs and kisses and asks you to write! They read our community letter in Church to everyone.

Priest. They have a new priest – seems first class.

Sebastian is recovering, albeit slowly. He has a new baby due August 1.

Water – remains a major problem.

Cell Phones – are everywhere. We should call them.

AKF – they decided to join AKF and pay the modest fee.
- **The Conference.**

We all attended varied sessions, and learned a good deal. One of the most important things is that separating charity versus justice is hard, very hard. We are up there with the best of them in trying to do it. Another is that there are as many ways to structure these South / North relationships as there are people doing it. Funding, projects, relationships are all over the map. For my money, I think we need to catch a few babies while we are working on the folks who throw them in.
- **Fair Trade Coffee.** A very memorable parallel was drawn by a member of the NicaNet committee. Think about the drug trade. It flourishes because the MARKET in the US is huge. If we could get the US market for fair trade coffee huge, we could do an enormous amount of good. Demand it everywhere you buy coffee.
- **Final Celebration.** We were treated to a great deal of Nicaraguan music and dance, including one lovely young lady of about 8 years old, and a group of energetic dancers who shook and shimmied until I thought the walls would collapse. Amazing.

Detailed Notes

1. State of the Country.

We had a brief orientation or “con junta” from Elena and Luis, and then later a longer one from a history professor – Aynn Setright – originally from the States. She has lived in Nicaragua since 1984 - 23 years. Her children are in the schools and she has an excellent, balanced view of both facts and opinions. These notes are a mix of those with my own reading of the newspaper and observations. Hopefully Elena can improve on this for me.

a. History.

Ms. Setright gave us a 30 minute summary of Nicaraguan history. I wish I could have captured the whole thing – it was excellent, and nicely balanced. Her husband was an officer in the Nicaraguan military, and he maintains some of those connections. She suggested that a book that might help: Windows for Truth.

She walked us through the Spanish period, and their overthrow, the US Marine occupation, Sandino’s ouster of the marines, and his assassination and the support for Somoza, the head of the National Guard.

The Church was clearly supportive of the status quo, with Somoza.

Colombia Bishop’s conference in the 1970s had made strong statements about liberation theology. The Kingdom of Heaven is here and the promise of justice is now, not happiness later. That gave considerable support to the Sandinista movement. But Rome attacked that theology, and basically supported the governments against it – including the murder of Oscar Romero.

With the earthquake in 1972, Somoza managed to take the majority of the funds that came as aid. In 1976, with Jimmy Carter as President, the FSLN got a major boost, as he stopped US support for Somoza. He thought it was not right to support a totalitarian regime. On 7/19/1979, Somoza left the country after the successful uprising. It is a very big holiday.

She talked about the National Literacy campaign of 1980. The government was persuaded that a true democracy was impossible unless people could read. Thousands of volunteers were trained, and they went to every part of the country to teach everyone to read.

Illiteracy at the time was very high – 80%? We went to see the traveling exhibit that celebrates this campaign. One of the moving scenes in the film has a 10 year old boy teaching a group of adults to read. Everyone was involved.

Reagan’s election, and authorization from Congress to support the overthrow of Ortega.

The Contra war – 50,000 casualties. Professionals targeted, they blew up schools and granaries – anything to disrupt the government. These were very dangerous times. Today we would call it terrorism. When Congress stopped the funds, Oliver North found funding through arms deals with Iran. Many Americans came naively thinking they could stop it by being in the way.

There was a lot of publicity in the US about the repression of the Mesquite population on the east coast. They were actually about trying to gain their independence, and the government resisted. The Eastern half of Nicaragua was an English colony, and the languages are English and a variety of native tongues. They are trying to create something like the nationhood status that Native Americans have.

She talked about the Contra recruiting program. Either you joined them or the Sandinistas. Some of the kids said they joined the Contras because they had better boots and weapons.

In 1984, Ortega was elected, but there was really no opposition.

In 1990, Violetta Chamorro was elected as a compromise candidate – 2 of her sons were

Contras, 2 were Sandinista. She said that the US support for Chamorro and the Contras was a factor, but she thought that the symbols they used had a greater influence. Ortega was using the fighting cock, and Chamorro used a dove – the people responded to the hope of peace. She said this was the first time in recorded history that a violent overthrow of the government gave up power through a democratic process. All of the 14 opposition parties joined together to get 52% of the vote – but Ortega carried 48%.

2006 election, Ortega won with a much smaller percentage: 35%? She thinks a large factor was that Ortega switched to a different symbol. I had thought that Ortega's networking with everyone was the reason he won the election. He made friends with the Cardinal, passed anti-abortion legislation, and has visited with every national leader. Our speaker said it was more likely the fact that he changed his symbol. She says that the electorate is simply not that well informed. Newspapers are not widely read, and the people are not well informed. They tend to go with simple slogans, symbols, and the party network.

If you drive around Managua now, there are these huge pictures of Ortega everywhere. Most people think they are stupid – is this a personality cult or something?

b. **Chamorro Government.**

People called it Peace with Misery. It was the worse of neo-liberalism. Foreign aid was reduced, the coffee market collapsed, education and health assistance were privatized, and the country had a huge national debt from the war – \$6 Billion. People actually were starving and dying from lack of food – a rare thing in this country.

c. **1997 – 2001 – The PLC and Aleman.** A national ethics group lists him as the 9th most corrupt politician in the last 100 years. Hurricane Mitch greatly enriched him.

d. **2001-2006 – Bolanos elected** – 9/11 had just happened, and the “axis of evil” put Ortega on the side of evil. Aleman's VP, won the election, on a campaign against corruption. He got 38% of the vote against Ortega's 20%. His slogan was: I'm rich, I don't need to steal. One of his first actions was to prosecute and convict Aleman of graft. But the anti-corruption did not go much further than that.

2. Today's Status.

a. **The New Ortega.** Everyone says that he is a different man this time. He is not the revolutionary leader of the past. That could be good or bad, depending on your perspective. He has connected with everyone, including the Cardinal and the US Ambassador and the opposition party.

b. **The Pact.**

There is a lot of discussion of the “Pact” that Ortega and Aleman concluded between the 2 parties that make up the government. Basically, they agreed to exclude the other parties, to reduce the Nicaraguan political process to a 2 party system. Hey, it works in the US, why not here.

As a result, they lowered the percentage needed to elect the President from 45% to 35%, so that Ortega was elected without the need for a runoff election. It also resulted in the courts gradually expanding Aleman's confinement. He was in prison a short time, then moved to a hospital suite for supposed medical needs, and then to house arrest, and now he is under “country arrest”. Of course, if he left the country, he is wanted in several other places for money laundering charges and other things.

c. **Government Openness.**

There is a lot less government openness. Ortega has secret meetings with all kinds of

people, including the US Ambassador, and no one knows what is going on. This generates a lot of conspiracy theories. From my reading of the news papers, both the “left” and the “right” think that there is a real risk of a totalitarian threat from this President.

d. **Reconciliation Commission.**

This effort, chaired by the Cardinal, sounds like something like the South African one – meant to bring about reconciliation of the National Guard Contras. Luis says it is really an effort to give all of those guys their government pensions. This is one example of the basic lack of trust in the government.

e. **Community Councils.**

Ortega has formed a whole set of people’s councils around the country. Both newspapers hold them in some suspicion. You know about the newspapers, of course. Nuevo Diario is the “leftist” one, and La Prensa, is the “rightist” one. The “rightist” one is the best one for business and international news. The “leftist” one has more community and people interest stories. They are both negative on El Comandante. And La Prensa always refers to Aleman, the ex president as “that criminal Aleman” – “el reo”.

In the best of worlds, these new government councils could be a way to get popular support and provide a means for people to give the government input. The History professor thought that might actually work. She used the example of these same councils under Chamorro. But the fear is that they will be a party apparatus, to keep people in line with the party. They could be used as the avenue to distribute aid, and it seems that only people supportive of the government are named to them.

As it happens, Miguel Angel ?, one of the representatives of the Teustepe Community, is the Vice President of the local council, and he was the head of the council under Chamorro. He spoke up and pointed out that he was not a Sandinista, and he and the other members of his council were NOT going to have it run by the Sandinistas. See my note on him further on.

The President’s Wife is taking a big role in the government and these councils – not a normal thing for this country. No one there commented on it, but the Constitution has an absolute ban on the president succeeding himself. But there is no ban on his wife or children. The Ortegas could be in power forever by rotating it between them.

f. **Energy Crisis.** This continues. The country only has about 30% of the capacity needed, so there are rolling blackouts in all parts of the country. Managua seems to bear the brunt of it. AKF has an emergency generator, and all of the PCs have a UPS, but it has a pretty limited time. There are arrangements with Venezuela for fuel and generators, and some Japanese outfits are shipping generators, but none of these are online as yet.

g. **Government Programs - Education.** Ortega moved relatively quickly to make all education free again. Technically, there is no tuition in public schools, but the fees and uniforms kept a lot of kids out of school. He eliminated those for government schools, and for many that get some government funding. The result is a 40% or more attendance, but without classrooms, teachers, books or bathrooms to handle them. People are generally pleased with this step, but there are no funds to pay for all of this.

h. **Health Care.** He also moved quickly to make Health Care affordable. But again, there are no funds. Doctor’s salaries cannot be paid, and there is not enough medicine in the clinics. Everyone talked about having to buy medicine from the pharmacy.

i. **Zero Hunger “Hambre Cero”.**

The government has also initiated a creative program called “Zero Hunger”. It’s basically a way to encourage the peasant farmers to get back to a self sufficient agrarian economy. They are given a milking cow, hopefully one that is pregnant, a number of chickens, a pig, etc. The idea is that they should be able to feed themselves, and have enough to sell some. Negative comments on this abound, but there is also some hope that it might work. There do not seem to be any controls or requirements, which could really be problematic in this culture. If it is seen as a free gift, it could be simpler to sell the animals than to raise them for food. The government is spending \$2,000 on each family, and the administrative costs are about \$250 for each.

It is being done through the women - 75,000 of them – who are organized into groups and trained to sustain it. They each get 5 chickens, 1 cow, seeds, a pig, 5 fruit trees, and 5 other trees. And they are taught how to make manure gas for cooking.

j. **Poverty and Unemployment.**

40% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day and 80% less than \$2. This is the UN standard for abject poverty. Unemployment is somewhere around 60% to 80%.

k. **Army.** She reports that the army is very professional, and is a-political. The people do not fear them, which is very positive. She doubts that they would threaten the government.

l. **A Country of Poets.** She loves the Nicaraguan people. Where else do people celebrate a national poetry event! This happened in Managua in February while we were there.

3. **State of AKF.**

AKF is doing well.

Center - the operation of the Center is taking much more of their energy than they had planned – but it is a profitable operation. They have been hosting things for fees, and some without fee when the cause was in line with their goals. For example, they hosted a conference for Haitian women among others. They are developing a reputation for being able to do this sort of thing – which is a mixed bag, as it detracts from the other efforts, such as the farm idea. This week was particularly crazy, with this conference and 2 delegations – GA and another which came the day we left.

Center Construction. The pavilion is complete, with a beautiful flagstone floor and 2 bathrooms nearby. The laundry is also complete.

Legalized. They had to move ahead more quickly and form a legal partnership for the ownership of the center, because of the pressure that the government is going to bring on taxes, employment taxes and other stuff. It is a limited partnership and not the non-profit that they had hoped to create. They are still pursuing a US based non profit for contributions. One of the Rotary delegates is a tax attorney with considerable non-profit experience.

Team. They are spending considerable time training the team members in English, community development, popular education – that kind of thing. Carmen has left. Newell resigned because it was clear that AKF could not afford him. He is still involved as a community member and volunteer member of the team. Elena is trying to hand off some of the delegation work. She attended just one day of our Teustepe visit. Memo handled the bulk of things.

Farms. There is still considerable interest in the farm idea in the South. They are looking at other

alternatives in addition to the Cantera organization. To refresh you on this – they call themselves a “school” now, and one part of their effort will be training people in sustainable agriculture, toward self-sufficiency. They took the Rotary delegation to visit Cantera.

4. **Delegates from Teustepe.**

Teustepe sent 2 people to the conference. We had told them that they could send up to 4. When we asked them, we heard a couple of different stories. First it sounded like they were only allowed to send 2. And when we pointed out that we had invited 4, they said it was too expensive. Well, we paid the fees for the conference, and they got a ride there – they would have to pay their own way home by bus. I think some “cultural” thing is in the way here.

The delegates were Cora Flores, and Miguel Angel ?. I’m sorry I do not have their last names. I will get them from Elena.

We have met Cora before. Miguel Angel was an original member of the community, but dropped out due to pressure from his work. He is a welder. I think he is Marta’s Father – not sure on that. He has passed the business on to his son, and has rejoined the community. He is a very likeable guy. He is full of wise sayings – almost always in groups of three. For example, he says control is an essential thing when dealing with the government. You have to keep your eye on them – your eyeball, your eye lash, and your eye brow. He was the MC for the cultural presentation in Teustepe, and he laughs well. He also has considerable experience with the political process. When possible, I went with him to sessions at the conference, just to hear what he had to say. It was always thoughtful and interesting. The other people there referred to him as the “Campesino”. He was one of the few at the conference. There were no attendees from the other sistered communities. The Nicaraguan attendees were generally younger professional types from urban areas.

5. **Teustepe – people.**

Welcome – as always, they welcome us with smiles and hugs. And they all ask about all of you. And they want you to write, no question about it. As part of the introduction, one of them said “we hope this will not be your last visit”. But Elena tells me that this is a normal expression of welcome – like us saying “you all come back, you hear”. The group consisted of about 23 women, and 3 men – Eugenio, Miguel, and Feliciano.

Loan Program. As part of his introduction, Bob told them that we brought a contribution for the loan program to be shared with all of the communities. Elena queried me twice on this – and she said that we could have restricted it to just the Teustepe program.

Rosario – I stayed with her, and she seems fine. I learned that she is a committed Sandinista. She has several books on the revolution and the party. She doesn’t read the paper, however. She said it costs too much. I bought several while I was there and she never looked at them. And her TV was not working, so there is little exposure to news. I never saw anyone in the community with a newspaper. Actually, I did not see anyone else in town reading one, but someone must, as they sell them.

Sebastian - his surgery was July 1, and he is abed recovering. When we visited him, he was prone in bed. He sat up briefly to join in a prayer and photos. He seems to be in some pain. I noted that he said it will be another 2 weeks before he can walk. He had expressed some concern about funds to Nancy. Elena said that she talked with him about this. He said that the doctor scared him, as he was talking about a large sum of money needed for his recovery. His surgery was covered. And the community has been very supportive. Elena stressed to them that funds were available from the loan program if they chose to do that. This was consistent with what he told us.

Their baby is due in early August. His wife seemed well.

New Priest – they have a new pastor. He seemed really fine. He had studied in Rome so he spoke Italian. And he tried a little bit of English. They said when he came to town, he went around and visited all the sick. He asked the community whom he should visit, and they asked him to go with them and visit some folks who were not participating and invite them to return. Everyone seems to like him. I said that we had heard some negative comments about his predecessor – assured me that it was a health issue. He sends his greetings to our Pastor, and asked for his address. I gave him my card and wrote the GA address and Bill’s email on the back. I’ll be curious to see if he writes.

Local Economy – it is still a subsistence business. Everyone sells something to their neighbors. Several families buy a cow weekly, and then butcher it to sell it to their neighbors. They seem to choose different days of the week in different parts of town.

Cows and Animals. It still amazes me that cows are marched right through the center of town, and that pigs and chickens graze all over the place.

Street Vendors for building materials. There are lots of street vendors in Teustepe, but it dawned on me one day that a truck was driving up and down selling huge construction blocks. People buy them for building their homes as they can.

6. **Used Clothing Business.** Quite a few people are selling used clothes – some to neighbors, some to outlying areas. AKF has encouraged them to band together to switch suppliers to one in Managua that can provide higher quality clothes. They seem unable to do that. I think some of that is a reluctance to trust each other with anything related to money.

I wonder if there isn’t some way to give them a stepping stone into this? Some training, some longer term loan or grant to kick it off so that they can see that it would work. Ideas?

7. **Water** – It is still a problem. It is infrequent. When it does come sometimes it is not drinkable, or even usable for washing, as it has dirt in it. Some water is being trucked in and distributed. We were not clear on whether they had to pay for it or if it was free for subscribers. I think they are paying for it because they said that it costs 20 to 60 Cordoba (\$1.10 - \$3.33) for a barrel, which is enough for one night. The normal water bill is about 55 Cordoba (\$3.00) per month - they do not have meters. We were also not clear whether or not people are paying their water bill. The school has its own well, and some people can get water there.

They said that the mayor committed to providing the funds to dig a new well. The water company brought a crew to town, dug for a while, and then stopped because they could not find water. They said the Company President told them to stop digging. I wasn’t clear whether they were using a well drilling rig or doing it by hand. They formed a committee to go to Managua, and the mayor is the head of it. But nothing seems to ever happen.

At the last public meeting, only 50 people showed up. How does one sensitize these folk to the need to get out there and make something happen?

8. **Cell Phones.**

There are 2 cell phone towers in Teustepe, and almost everyone has a cell phone. I got some of their numbers, and told them I would call. We can call them on SKYPE for 3 cents a minute, and I think they do not pay for incoming calls.

9. **Orientation.** We needed a refresher. We forgot about the formal spokesperson to say thank you, and for introductions, and we did not have a song ready. And I think we should bring some token gift for the family where we stay. Rosario still had the bottle of maple syrup from Wisconsin that we brought years ago.

And next time, we should all sing something really fine in Spanish – like Nicaragua, Nicaraguita. We should also bring some small token gift for Peter – the special needs boy. He is so appreciative of anything we do, any attention.

10. Teustepe and AKF.

The community did decide to join with AKF, and are about raising the funds for the nominal fee due in August. Elena thought they would have no problem with that. They have been given fall dates for a planning conference on their future. After the workshop, Elena asked them to think about their future and what kinds of discussions would be helpful to them.

AKF is starting a strategic plan process with all of southern communities, and will also engage the north so that we can support each other in our dreams of where we want to go.

11. History of GA and Teustepe.

The workshop in Teustepe was an exercise in the history of our relationship. Elena thought we started around 1988. This was a very worthwhile thing to do. I heard lots of comments about it. I think we should flesh this out, and put it into a book that we can share with Teustepe. It would give us all a common ground and understanding.

For example, there was no mention made of the baseball stadium roof and the cows project. I was the only one that mentioned the commercial school because I had to carry all of those typewriters around. Rosario said that they did not bring up the cows because it was a little uncomfortable as to what happened to them. I believe that some of them formed the basis of Feliciano's herd. I would like to hear the rest of that story from both sides.

12. AKF High School Volunteer.

Covenant had a high school student, Emma, spending the summer with AKF as a volunteer. Her command of Spanish was excellent, and she was a very capable adult as well. She had the advantage of having Spanish speaking day care as a child. If anyone in our parish wanted to consider this in the future, it would be a tremendous opportunity. They would clearly need a good command of the language

13. South to North Visits.

While visiting at Rosario's, Coco (the leader when we last visited in February) asked me if we had decided to discontinue the South to North visits. She said Elena had told them that. I told her that we were considering it because of the risks involved that someone would try to stay behind in the US. As I think about it now, these are important for a couple of reasons, whatever the risk.

- a. It is sales and marketing for our parish and our community in the North. We generate a lot more enthusiasm with this than anything else we do.
- b. It engages future leaders in the south. The people who are long term members seem to be the ones that have traveled. They have connections – they make a commitment.
- c. But the selection of travelers must consider the VISA issue. They have to be people not likely to jump ship and try to stay here. They have to realize the real negatives to the program if they do that. This is clearly the biggest negative of the visits to the North.
- d. I'd like to see the leader expected to travel and some young adults. There were a lot of young men and women involved in the cultural presentation as dancers.

14. Reflections on Teustepe.

Things learned. I spent some time talking with Rosario about things in general. We have clearly taught them some things. She said that her own awareness of the litter problem has been heightened by her visit to the states. The litter is everywhere down there – but I think it takes a fairly high level of awareness to make a dent in it. She also commented that this pot luck stuff does not work so well, as some people always take more than their share! She also made a

comment that she was not asked to help plan the entertainment for the conference, so she was not going to take part in it. But then when we got there, a new “Cuban singer” was introduced, and out comes Rosario in a flaming red dress and a load of jewelry, lip syncing to a song. I’m never sure when she is putting me on.

Hospitality / Generosity. Rosario said that everyone is always impressed by our hospitality – that they talk about it. They were mightily impressed that Bill and Barb gave up their home for them. She also said that after staying with us they realize that it is difficult for us to adapt to their conditions, and they respect us for doing so. Grace said she is quite used to it by now!

Rosario says that they still talk about our generosity with Hurricane Mitch.

Letters. When they get a letter from us, they read it to whole parish now. What a good idea.

Children – Marriage. There are women in town who have been abandoned by their men. And if the man is not a good provider, the woman will kick him out or leave. They still see children as a real blessing.

Charity. I was standing in front of Rosario’s, just watching people, and a young girl – maybe 12 – stopped and asked me where I was from. The US, I told her. She said: Do you have 5 Cordoba? About 25 cents. You can’t blame them. I was clearly a chelo – a white face – and sometimes it works. Why not ask?

Catholic? Coco asked me whether I was a Catholic. I explained my history a bit – and YES, I am definitely a Catholic. I was curious as to where that came from. It may have come because I did not kneel for the Canon at Mass on Thursday – I was following the lead of several others in the congregation, although most people knelt. And Emma, one of the translators, is not a Catholic.

Concerns – they expressed great concerns that we were not all together in Church, so that someone could translate for Barbara. Emma was on the other side with another group. I assured them that Barb was fine. They really worry about that stuff.

Marge – write to Carmen. She sends a big hug. Everyone always asks that you write.

15. The Conference.

The conference itself was a mixed bag, but certainly worth attending. I learned a lot – not perhaps what they intended that I take away, but certainly worth the visit. Some of the Board members of the Nicanet group stayed at AKF and we got to meet them. I was pretty impressed with the group. They have all been hands on engaged in the country for years, but they are primarily in the US.

a. Leftist Rhetoric.

I am not a conservative in anything but finances – but there was some “Leftist Rhetoric” from attendees at the conference. I think that is fairly normal. The “leftist” stuff is primarily a simplistic view of economics and the impact of large international businesses. One of the speakers, I think the Executive Director of The Nicaragua Network, distinguished between “globalization” and “globalism”. The latter is a kind of blind faith in unregulated free market economics, with minimal controls. This is the “neo-liberal” approach to things – unfettered greed and selfishness will work just fine if you leave it alone. But globalization as such is here to stay. The conference was a fine example of that.

b. Rotarians.

I was concerned about their response to some of the radical statements at the conference, but they seemed to survive it well. They seem fairly conservative politically. But Rotaries all over the world are engaged in Nicaragua, and there were others represented at this meeting. And there are a fair number of local Rotary clubs. They are focused on sustainable development – adopting the UN Millennium project approach.

16. **Keynote Speaker – the Mayor of Bluefields.**

This speaker was very interesting. He was the Spanish speaking mayor of the English speaking city of Bluefields on the East Coast. He talked about the importance of simply being human. It is more important than party, than religion. Be human, stop and see the problems. 1.8 Billion people on the planet live on less than \$1 a day. He was the government's ambassador to Catalan, Spain, and he formed a sister city relationship between Catalan and Bluefields. It was based on "solidarity", not charity. Solidarity seems to be used as a synonym with hermanamiento – brotherhood. The Spanish came to Nicaragua to see what they could do to help. He asked that we not lose our own identity, and not ask us to lose ours. He said most people that visited were not fundamentally changed. When they went back to Spain, they returned to their former ways. What can you do when 85% of the people are unemployed and poor?

In Bluefields, people do not starve. They have abundant fish and shrimp. But they are very poor. His people ask him about the US, how people can live in a country that spends so much on perfume, let alone on the military. They find it amazing that only 22% of Americans have a passport. Most Nicaraguans have a Central American Passport. He said it is a scandal that a man in Barcelona can buy a house costing \$200 M, while people in Bluefields are living under a piece of plastic.

He said that everything in Nicaragua is corrupt.

He had carefully avoided politics during the talk, but some questions pushed him that way. He said this was his opinion, not that of the conference. He was a Sandinista – worked for the government as envoy to Spain. He knows Daniel and Daniel's wife even more closely. He now totally disagrees with them – he thinks they are totally corrupt. He doesn't understand how someone who stole at least \$200 M from the country can be under "country arrest" and not be locked in prison. And he is still running his political party!

He is disappointed that the people are not rising up in protest. They are quiet, afraid. Some of his comments were mentioned in the final session as one of the better things about the conference.

17. **Fair Trade Coffee and the Drug Trade.**

One of the speakers, I think it was Tom Baker, a member of the Board of Nicaragua Network, made a pitch for Fair Trade Coffee that stuck with me. He says, you know, it is all about market. Look at the drug trade. People in the US demand it, and it gets there – millions of dollars of drugs – even though it is completely illegal. People in the south are not the market – the US is the market. We pour tons of money into Latin America with this.

Why can't we do the same thing with Fair Trade coffee? What if the market for coffee in the US was only for Fair Trade? Even if it were 20 or 30 % Fair Trade. What would happen? Don't boycott the other coffee – that really hurts everyone that grows it. But demand Fair Trade Coffee everywhere. You can get it, they can provide it, and it won't cost more. It generates more income to the producers, and it would change the market. Bob Walz cited the example of Starbucks and Caribou. If you insist, Caribou will make it and have it available. Starbucks just throws words at it. Drink the coffee, but demand Fair Trade Coffee.

Consider giving a lot more Fair Trade coffee as gifts.

18. **Boaco Water Project.**

I did not attend this session, but Barb did, and these are basically her notes. I believe that a community in the North facilitated this water project with a town in the province of Boaco, not far from Teustepe. The presentation was on Sustainable Water and Sanitation Development in Rural Communities.

Carmen Gonzales of Agua para la Vida (APLV) (Water for Life) indicated that over 50% of people

in the world live without potable water. Within Nicaragua, since 1950 50% of the forests have been cut down for firewood, grazing for cattle, industrial or agricultural use. APLV was created in 1987 by a US hydro engineer. It currently is headed by Carmen Gonzales who previously headed Habitat for Humanity in Nicaragua.

80% of health issues are related to the lack of clean water. 35% of deaths of children under the age of 5 years are related to the lack of clean water.

The philosophy of APLV is to educate local campesinos on how to organize themselves. The purpose is to empower local communities by encouraging citizen participation and open dialogue with local, municipal and national governmental agencies. APLV encourages long term ownership and continued maintenance of the water system they assist to develop in each community.

APLV's criteria for determining a community that would benefit from their services by first understanding if the community has other monetary resources or another organization that could potentially assist them in their needs. APLV works with that organization provided all sides are agreeable and willing to work together under APLV's philosophy of citizenship and local government participation. Once the community is determined to be a viable site for this project, APLV assists the citizens in forming a water commission, which not only involves local citizens but also local government officials such as the mayor. APLV works with a hydro-engineer to identify a water source for the community. Once the source is determined they develop a topographical study for the most effective way to move the water from the source to the citizens.

APLV assists the community with the construction of the facility along with negotiating with any landowners should the system need to run over their property. The citizens and local government must establish policies, pricing and rules governing the water and sanitation system. This includes adding water meters to each home. The homeowner may then monitor their water use thereby allowing the individual to use as much or as little water as the family may require. Once the rules and policies have been established and agreed to, all parties must abide by the structure and fees. One of the critical items within this policy is the signoff by the local government (mayor) that at least 10% of the annual city budget must be set aside for maintenance and operational costs of the water system.

APLV also works with a young person within the community which will be selected by the citizen's panel to be sent to a technical school for two years (financial aid is provided through additional outside sponsorship) to learn how to maintain and service the water & sanitation system. The young person agrees that after the 2 years of training they will return to the community to maintain the system.

APLV has found with the citizen participation, buy-in by municipal government officials along with training of a young person to maintain and service the system there is a sense of community ownership along with continued maintenance of the water system. Along with these items APLV also works with the community to establish a hygiene commission which will do education both at a community level and with home visits. APLV also works with MENSA health officials and provides environmental education through encouraging the establishment of nurseries within the community to reforest the area especially as protection for the water source.

As with Habitat for Humanity, APLV works with outside organizations for funding for the costs of

the construction of the system and the financial aid to train the young person on maintaining the system. After that the water and sanitation system should be supportable by the fees charged to individual users and the funds set aside for operations and maintenance in the city budget.

19. **Charity vs. Justice.**

There was a presentation on this, but it is not a simple thing. The speaker cited a whole list of things that distinguish charity, but it all sounded like projects to me. The money comes from outside, although the decisions and control are local. To me, the ultimate question is what happens when the outside money stops. Can this thing run on its own? If not, it looks a lot like charity, creating dependency.

20. **Sister City Relationships.**

There are lots of these relationships out there under this umbrella. Many different kinds.

- a. **Tipitapa** and the upper West Side of New York and have a long term relationship. They have a children's nutrition program, organization of women, education on CAFTA. The nutrition program feeds 40 kids, and the staff started a cooperative day care in conjunction with it. But the funds for the food program and staff come from NY. They also have a water project, and something called a "chicken bank". I spoke with the Executive Director, Dena Fisher of Dos Pueblos: tipitapa.org. They want to start a computer school for the community.
- b. **Project Leon** is another example – I did not meet anyone from there at the conference.
- c. **Fairfax California** has a city to city relationship with a town in Nicaragua. They have raised \$670,000 over 22 years. They said it was a solidarity model – not charity – but I'm not sure. They tell this story. An American girl had lost her family, was somewhat depressed about this, but came to help build a school. She met an 11 year old boy there who came home from working on the coffee plantation because he wanted to be sure that there was a school to educate his younger siblings. And the single mom with 4 kids with whom she stayed had food for that one month because she was there. She said the girl returned home with a new outlook on life, because of the experience. This sounds like charity to me. A good thing to do, no question – but it is not sustainable anything.
- d. **German City and ?**. These two towns have a long term relationship, through a single German man who started it with his own funds. They send visitors from Germany, fund an old folk's home, and other things. The old folk's home came about because a woman was found dead on the street one morning. The kids in Germany do cultural events as fund raising celebrations.
- e. **Sacramento Calif. and San Juan Oriente**. This started with the mayor visiting, and buying some local ceramics. He took them home and sold them for a lot more than they cost. Now they have a standing arrangement. Then send visitors who buy the ceramics from local artisans, and then sell them at home in a gallery, called "La Raza". The funds raised are returned to the community. They get about \$20,000 per year. They have done a water project, a new roof for the school, paid off some debt on the school, paved a street, and built a new clinic. They normally provide funds for the materials, but the labor is all done locally. They have also funded 12 scholarships for the kids – I think to college. The central government has just recently expanded the availability of college by opening branches around the country.
They talked about the difficulty in getting goods to the states. They now send them through an exporter in Managua, and they had suggested to the community that they form their own

export company. Another person in the group discouraged that – it is complicated, expensive, bribes are essential, etc.

They said that all of their efforts are locally controlled and directed, so it is not charity. It still sounds like charity to me – although, as always, good things to do. What happens when they stop? These things all sound like things the local government should be doing. They are looking for another person to be their contact. The man who has been doing this is moving to another part of Nicaragua, and they need someone they can trust with the funds, etc.

This particular community had a serious problem. One member of the California group decided that she didn't like how they were doing things. She went out on her own and raised some money, and brought it down to the southern community, and offered it for a specific project. No local control, etc. They decided that they didn't want to interfere with that, but they also don't want to have their name associated with it.

- f. **Somotillo and Benington Vt.** James Walker was the key person here. He runs a canoe tour service in Vermont and in Nicaragua. They have had a 20 year relationship.
- g. **San Ramon, Matagalpa and Henniker New Hampshire.** They support some kind of clinic. They all talk about avoiding handouts. This outfit uses the Rotary Club in Matagalpa to transfer the funds to their community and watch over them, I think. They funded an ecotourism project that does appear to be sustainable. They also have a water project. He said that they started with projects, but have developed into a relationship now. The community has to come together to recognize a clear need, and engage the people.
- h. **Casa Baltimore.** It sounds like they have a LOT of projects. But they talked about the equality of the two committees – North and South. It sounds like a continual struggle to make it equal.
- i. **Boulder Colo. and Jalapas.** They have a person from Boulder living in the town. I think they are there on a volunteer basis. That is their liaison at the moment.
- j. **Merced Calif. with Moto?** They fund 10 scholarships to the local branch of the University – I think in Leon. They also gave \$2,500 to the University of Leon for an English language lab. They have promoted patio gardens. I think these are vegetable gardens in back or front yards. They did a water project with \$80,000 from Rotary International, for which they contributed \$30,000.
- k. **Hudson Wisc. and Ocotol in Nueva Segovia, northern Nicaragua,** These cities have a sister city relationship through the Rotary Clubs in both towns. Roy, one of the Rotarians from Hudson reported on this. At one point, they shipped 6 freighters of baseball equipment and used bicycles through the Rotary in Estelí for this community. They also said that the importing of things like that now is complicated and expensive, for one reason or another, so they don't do that any more. It's cheaper to send the money and buy things like bikes and baseballs locally.
- l. **Sending Money.** The roundtable had a discussion about how to send money internationally without huge fees. One group said that their community had a checking account. They air mail the check, they deposit it, and after 20 days, they can withdraw the funds. They did not see any problem with this. Barb was in this group, and her sense is that sending funds electronically from bank to bank is not complicated, nor very expensive. It sounds like people have been carrying the funds – like us – and want to stop doing that. We need to find out from AKF why we can't wire things from GA to their bank account, or at least

write a check. There doesn't appear to be any import tax on money or anything. Nicaraguans in the states send funds home all the time.

m. **Other Examples.** I plan to check out the Nicaragua Network web site, and the Sister to Sister program for other examples.

21. **Need for Liaison.** I heard this brought up several times – people looking for a long term liaison with their community. I suggested to AKF that they send a flyer to the mailing list for the conference, or post something on the Sister City web site about their capabilities in this area. They were also clear that this is more than just controlling funds and translating. The cultural issues are major. One of the Nicaraguans, Fatima, a young lady who works in the Nutrition Clinic in San Juan Oriente said it well. She said, the Northerners are always direct, while we talk around things. She has come to prefer the directness but it isn't easy to do. That is one of the reasons it is difficult to do things by telephone, even if people speak the language well. They would prefer a video conference – we told them about Skype – but it does require a PC and a high speed connection. Some cities do not have a high speed option as yet. I know that Estelí has one, but I think the one in Teustepe isn't very good. I meant to visit the Internet Café, but I didn't get to it.

22. **What is Solidarity?**

We had a discussion on this at one session. A young Nicaraguan man said it is about friendship, learning from each other – not funds, and not charity. Miguel said it is about raising our consciousness as citizens, to feel the pains of others, it is about love. He said it comes from Paul – “Love one another”. They will get tired of bringing fish, so they teach us to fish. It is also about sharing ideas – and they need ours in the North. It is also about learning English! He gave an example of the Chamorro government. When they needed a school, the government supplied the nails, the cement and the forms. The people of Teustepe made the bricks and built the school. He is an amazingly thoughtful guy!

This roundtable run by Jim Walker above had a good discussion on what we are doing and how we are doing it. Some of the comments:

- The relationship is the key thing.
- People to people is key – the projects are just things we do together.
- Do small projects to overcome the fear of change.
- The leadership in some communities does not change.
- They do not empower their members.
- They are afraid to ask for things.
- They do not want to see money spent on local staff.
- Popular education workshops are the key – to empower them, teach them to organize.
- Comment from Nicas – we need to do these things ourselves, organize and educate ourselves.
- It doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to mature.
- There is a need for a sharing network in the North.
- Nicas lack a sense of citizenship – participation in the public process. Our speaker in Feb. made a big point of this. It sounds like the idea is spreading.

One young Nicaraguan speaker (Cesar) made some excellent points. He said we need to be proud of our country. We have magnificent natural resources – volcanoes, thermal heat, waterfalls, forests, winds. We should be energy independent. All of the past interventions have reduced us to poverty. The goal of solidarity is to rebuild the capacity of the people.

Miguel said that our support helps them to be braver. He cited the example of the past local

council of the government. It had representatives from the local NGOs as well as the city government. The mayor and the NGOs had to report to the council on their use of the funds they received. He stressed the need to control them. He was hopeful that the new councils will be able to do this as well.

He said that he will report to his community that funding this conference helped the effort to build their own sense of energy and self sufficiency. He said, "We will change this country. Thank you for helping." "The Campesino" spoke well!

23. **Final Celebration.**

We had a wrap up for the notes of the conference. And then a PARTY. You have to see the pictures. A band, a guitarist from Bluefields, a beautiful young lady of about 8 who danced, and at least 2 dance troupes who did 5 or 6 different dances. The last one was the most energetic amazing display of dance moves I have ever been privileged to witness. I wish I had a video of that one. Then we all got out on the dance floor and jiggled around in what they call dance these days!