

This is my daily journal for our second mission trip to Nicaragua 2014. Once again I will be giving a play by play account of how God works through us and uses our meager talents for His glory and honor.

Last year everything completely fell together in the planning and rehearsing part of the trip so I just started with the events of day 1 in my report. This year, however, had so much happen before the first plane took off that I have to begin with the day we arrived home from last year's trip.

Last year was such an eye opening experience and such a unique opportunity for ministry that we couldn't wait to go back. We told Pastor Bob and Mary, the organizers of the annual trip, and informed our supporters. Plans began right away and we asked God for the right people to join us on our journey. Immediately, no one committed to the trip. Several people were interested but not for the dates we were planning to travel this year. Several members of last years team wanted to go but at a different time. This divided us up into two teams: one large team...and us.

As the months progressed and no one was signing up, we wondered if this trip would even happen; then I got the call to come and speak at the church in which I grew up. After the lesson, in passing, I mentioned the trip and one young lady and a whole family came up and said they wanted more information. After a couple of days...we had a team of 10! It was 2/3 the size of last years team, but we knew it would work with some good organization and leadership from Mary, who is a gifted organizer, and of course God's provision.

Fundraising commenced, practices on the music and the skit were going well, and everything was falling into shape as it had the year before. Now, at this point we were learning all the same lessons we had last year, but God decided to move our spiritual training into a new dimension.

First, our fundraising had not taken off as it had the previous year. In fact after all of the letters had gone out and support had come in, we were not even two-thirds of the way. This had me a little worried, but one supporter heard of our need and sent us the rest of the support. Once again, we had trusted our Lord and He provided for our needs. Everything looked great and then...

We got the news that our leader, Mary had to have emergency knee surgery. This would not only cost us a team member, but the one who made everything run smoothly. I knew I would have to take up some slack which I was prepared to do, but a couple of weeks later, another team member needed emergency gall bladder surgery. We were now 8 doing the work of 15. I felt like Gideon and God was reminding me that this is all in His hands, not mine.



However, God wasn't finished paring us down just yet, due to more serious illness and logistic problems, the family of four would be unable to go. Our team of 10, that was supposed to be 15, was now four: Pastor Bob, Karen, Shannon, and me.

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### Day 1

So we packed our bags and headed to Managua via Atlanta. We had an un eventful flight, which is always the best in my opinion, and the Lord's hand was on us as we flew through customs without a hiccup.



Even the roads to the compound in Masatepe had been somewhat fixed so it was a smooth ride compared to last year. Steve told us that the rainy season had begun in May and yet, they had had no rain. It made for better roads, but really damaged their crops of rice and beans.

## Day 2

After a wonderful meal and a good night sleep, we got ready for our first day of ministry. Last year, I read Francis Chan's "Crazy Love" as my devotional. This year, I chose John Piper's "Don't Waste Your Life" and "The Second Coming" by John MacArthur.

In today's reading Piper emphasized the point that we only get one pass at this life. That is a very sobering thought. He talked of the dangers of "Intellectual snobbery" or the belief that all that is new is by its very newness, better. He emphasized the need to understand, as a believer who wants to make the most of their life, to learn from those who have gone before.

After a devotional in Psalm 1 from Pastor Bob, we boarded the bus and headed to our first village outreach, **El Capulin 3**. The Nicaraguan people are very laid back, but when we did the drama, "Chains", the reaction was amazing. It is a vivid picture of the chains of sin (law) and the victory in Christ (Grace). They applauded and cheered as Jesus removed the chains and threw them to the ground, defeating sin and death.



After lunch and a deep theological discussion on a number of topics related to the church today, we headed to **Masaya**, the second and larger village of the day. As we drive with the windows down, I recall, less than a week ago, telling Shannon she couldn't wind the window down in the car because the air conditioning was on. Now I take great delight in the 90 degree breeze hitting my face. As we minister here to a group of almost 100 kids, and think about the standard of living of most of the people here, I can't get the song out of my mind that we will be recording on our new CD this Fall, "All I Have Is Christ". We have so much, and these people have so little. Yes, we may not have enough money to afford all of the things we may want, but that does

not mean we are poor. Jesus, however is looking for people who will be willing to give up everything to follow Him. Sometimes, it is not until we get to the point that all we have is Christ, that we can be totally sold out for Him.

After a cold shower, which felt great, and delicious dinner, we had a time of prayer, worship, and bible study, we had a good long discussion on how a Christian should define themselves. Personally, I define myself as a slave of Christ. That seems to sum everything up and gives a high view of God.

## Day 3

This morning, after a breakfast of rice and beans and plantains, I gave a devotional on the life of Gideon. Gideon's account in the Bible was full of evidences of fear and trepidation, and yet God continued to use him and he wound up in the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11. It shows that there is hope for us all if we keep obeying what God calls us to do, we can be found faithful in the end.



Today, for my personal devotions, I took a few thoughts away from "Don't Waste Your Life". Some say, "Either you glorify God or pursue happiness"...but that is a false dichotomy. You achieve happiness in glorifying God. Here is a test to see whether you have been sucked into the world's distortion of love: Would you feel more loved by God if He made much of you or if He liberated you from the bondage of self regard, at great cost to Himself, so that you enjoy making much of Him forever? He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.



Today, is the day we get to return to two of the villages we visited last year. The first is **Aragon**. On the way, we passed by the city dump where we ministered last year. Once again, there were many lost souls out there collecting treasures to resell to put food in their bellies. Yesterday, Karen gave her testimony, today is Shannon's turn. She gave a wonderful testimony off the top of her head, which is not at all like Shannon... Actually, it's just like her. I have to plan and write everything out. I don't have the gift of improv, but Karen does and I guess Shannon got it from her.

It is a cooler day today, so that is a bit of relief. This was a nice size group of kids, but they seemed shy of me at the face painting station. Shannon had 5x the line I had. The kids seemed a bit more timid and less in a rush to get their "blessings". There were a lot more teenagers than we usually see and the message was a perfect fit for where they are. We just pray that their lives can be directed toward serving Christ before they make many of the mistakes from which some older adults need to recover.

Now, we head to a little village called **El Cuatro**, the four. This will be our second time in this village so we are excited to see what God has done in their lives in the past year. We started late because everyone arrived on "Nicaragua time", but the children were so sweet and since this was a small village, we gave a T-shirt to all of the kids. Before the service, while we were waiting, I had a good discussion with our two local translators, Wilmer and Ian. We talked a lot about the differences in Nicaragua and America and they were amazed to learn of what constituted poverty level in America. If you made what "poor people" make in America, in Nicaragua, you'd be considered rich. There is no safety net here and no chance of social advancement. Pretty soon you lose the youthful ambition and drive and just settle into an "existence". There is no hope in government like that which is so prevalent in the US. There are no jobs to be had as unemployment nears 50%. That is why they are so open to the gospel here. They have no hope or even a hope of hope, and, in contrast, Christ offers true hope. Wealth and education are not the same stumbling blocks to faith as they are in America. It's easy to wish their financial situation could be better, but if that comes at the cost of a stumbling block to their faith, I wouldn't wish that on them in a million years.



#### Day 4

Today, Karen, Shannon and I did a little mini concert followed by a devotional by Pastor Bob on Gal. 2:20. That message of being crucified with Christ was repeated in my reading from John Piper.

Since today is Sunday, we had service at the Land of Judah compound where we are staying. Trucks were sent out to two villages (**El Coyol** and **19 de Julio**) and brought the people to us. The Land of Judah compound, with its fresh fruit and lush gardens, not to mention, swing sets, must seem like a cross between the Garden of Eden and Disneyworld to these kids. We spent an hour or so before the service kicking around a soccer

ball with them. It is amazing how much fun you can have with nothing but a simple ball.

After a well needed nap after our soccer match and service, we loaded our equipment and supplies into the off road truck because we were going off road, up in the mountains. This was one of those army type trucks for soldiers and I felt a bit like laundry that had been through the wash cycle by the time we got there.

Firecrackers, dust, diesel fuel, cooking bananas, run-off from a chicken farm, fresh herbs, raw sewage, fertilizer, grilling chicken...oh, these are the pungent smells I have experienced in the span of one mile on the ride home to the compound. Needless to say it is a sensory experience.



We finally arrived at **El Chocoyo**, a town of squatters, and were greeted by a big wasp nest hanging about 2 feet above my head in our "stage area". Between the guitar, the generator, and the drama music provided by the rock band "Evanescence", we should be testing the wasp's resolve to stay in their nest.

The people are arriving on "Nicaragua time" once again, so after setting up, we had a good discussion with Steve about the political and economic system in the country and found that this is much worse off economically than in the neighboring countries of Honduras or Costa Rica. He said this is basically a little Venezuela. While many live in fear, they are an incredibly friendly people who are just trying to survive.



Steve told of how he just found this village by driving around and stopping to preach. He told them when he returns he could bring some food and when he returned, he fed a few people while sharing the good news. After a few trips like that he has someone in the village take a census so he can bring enough food for everyone, all the time giving the gospel. Soon a feeding center is set up and a group of the converts form a church.

This was a particularly heartbreaking village, first, because they all live in fear because they are basically squatters on the land. Dishonest lawyers are constantly writing up false legal documents telling them to get off the land and then they agree to represent them, for a fee, of course. There were also so many young teenage girls and almost all of them had a baby in their arms. According to Steve, one of the favorite pastimes of Nicaraguan men is to prey on 12 and 13 year old girls. It breaks my heart as a father but it blesses me to be able to offer them hope in Christ.

## Day 5

Today is our day off to do some sightseeing. On the way to Grenada, I read my devotions from DWYL and was reminded that the best is always yet to come, and that doesn't mean a big fat pension and luxury condominium, but Christ. Being with Christ is the one eternal thing that this world can never offer. Nothing here can compare to it, so to live here is for Christ's use and to die is always going to be better...or gain. Daily Christian living is daily Christian dying. The essence of praising Christ...is prizing Christ. He is our ultimate goal and destination so knowing and serving Him should be our ultimate desire while we live here. If we live for the gifts God gives us here, we

worship the gifts, not the Giver of the gifts. Our treasure must be the Giver, not the gift. That is such an important part of the Messiah Project's work. Yes, they use food as a tool to take the gospel to the people, but that is just what Christ did. He fed 20,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish, but not as an end to itself, it was a





means to draw a crowd. The gospel of the kingdom was the treasure. The God-man Jesus was the bread of life and the spring of living water.

Some may complain about short term missions and feeding programs and a whole host of other things, but those who complain often aren't doing. I'd rather be a doer, and you gain a totally different perspective when you are here. This is the right place for me to be, not only because I get to minister, but because I am being ministered to.

After eating breakfast at Cathy's, I was able to pick up a new pair of Ray Ban sunglasses for \$4 from a street vendor. They are usually \$200 or so, but

I know they had to be authentic because they had the logo and there is no way to copy that. From there we went on a boat cruise of lake Nicaragua. We then did some sightseeing in Grenada. We went to the oldest church in Central America, a Catholic Church which had all of the depictions of Christ on the via dolorosa, Christ on the cross, Christ in the tomb, but noticeably absent was Christ risen from the dead. There were places to burn candles and pay your money to get your relatives out of the unbiblical scam known as purgatory. Then we went on a horse and buggy ride around Grenada followed some shopping in the market square. We then made our annual stop at a local grocery store where I bought 11 bags of delicious high altitude Nicaraguan low acid coffee for a little over \$4 a bag. It's a lot cheaper than Starbucks and much better. From there we took a trip to the marketplace in Masaya to pick up a few trinkets for our family and friends.

## Day 6

Something I didn't understand at first is that, because of the culture, you can't give one of all of the "blessings" we brought to every child. They need to learn to be thankful for what God provides. If you give them too much, very quickly learn to expect it every time and judge the gift, and by extension, the Giver by the gift given. Many will show up late after the ministry and message just to get the freebies. If they don't come to hear about the blesser, they don't get the blessing. The tool cannot become an end to itself. A lot of the things we think would bless the people here would just cause contention in the village so we need to be cognizant of this and we follow the lead and the advice of Steve and Pastor Roberto, the "boots on the ground". There are so many times when we think of



ways to help these people but it would actually hinder the gospel work, cause dissension, or be taken the wrong way.



Our first village today is called **Mario Auxilladora**. Due to a local funeral of a little baby boy, the number of kids was down from what was expected, but we gave out all the food we had anyway and they all seemed to enjoy not only the blessings but the word that was preached. There we had a bunch of really cute little boys that kept getting in line for the food. They would clean their bowls off so that they looked clean. They would give us the biggest grins when we recognized them. They got seconds eventually. This is the only meal for a couple of days for many of them. It is a rice mixture that has extra nutrients specifically formulated for people who don't eat regularly.

It rained last night but it is sunny today and a little cooler. So far we have had no downpours mid-drama like last year.

Another interesting observation I have made is that people think differently about dogs and cats here than in the states. There was a little baby kitten, cutest thing, walking around in front of about 50 kids in one village before the presentation. Not one kid made an effort to give that kitten a bit of attention. Had that been in

America, after all of the ooh's and aaah's they would have surrounded the thing and not been able to pay attention to the program. Dogs walk through the proceedings and usually get pebbles thrown at them by the leaders for just daring to be there. Just the culture, I guess.



We forgot the generator today so someone from the compound will have to meet us with it at the next village, **Mirazul del Yano**. Pastor Roberto's car/golf cart wouldn't start, but evidently pushing it down a hill is all it takes to get it going. While we drive to the second village, I am preparing something to say as we give Bibles, polo shirts, and a nice big backpacks to seven pastors in the network. They would never be able to save up enough to afford these, so it is a great joy to present them with a study Bible so they can understand better God's Word and preach it to their people. I want to talk about the importance of studying and preaching, the inspiration of the word and how it will never fade away.

Today's gum of the day is a very refreshing mint. It is particularly refreshing considering the other days have been a banquet of pickle, thanksgiving dinner, popcorn, and bacon.

This village is by far the largest group, and my favorite. The kids were numerous but very well behaved. We had some time to kill before the ministry part waiting for the generator to arrive, but we forgot the soccer ball. Pastor Bob had the idea to do relay races with the kids. I thought, never in a million years is this going to work, but it did. He was able to explain it to them and even those who didn't understand caught on quickly. Everyone had a blast. They all lined up for blessings after the service, followed by giving out a meal.

When we got back to the compound we had the ceremony giving out the Bibles to the church leaders. They were moved and thanked us profusely. Just to show how God is using the Messiah Project here in Nicaragua, they started in 2002 with about \$35 worth of food and the gospel. That's it. They went to a village and started preaching. In the first 10 years, they had established 54 feeding centers, with 5000 people registered, giving out 63,800 meals per month, and had started 71 churches. In the next one year, from 2012 to 2013, that number had jumped to 245 feeding centers, with 25,000 people registered, distributing 245,000 meals per month, and 183 churches. Finally, from 9/13-6/14, that number has grown to 420 feeding centers, feeding 45,000 people 420,000 meals per month and 280 churches. They have only 12 salaried staff and 12 non-salaried staff. We got to see their office headquarters today and the logistics are astounding. The data entry is time consuming, but they keep track of every gift, every meal, every child, elderly person, and



handicapped person they feed by name in the system. I can't wait to see what God is going to do in the next year.

## Day 7

They had huge thunderstorms last night but all is calm and peaceful this morning as I stroll the compound and do my Reading from DWYL about having a wartime mentality in the spiritual battle that is the Christian life. John Piper writes about TV being the great life waster, and I can't help but agree. I know I'd rather be working for the kingdom than watching TV when The Lord returns. This morning, I will give a devotional on Matthew 24 and the need to watch, wait...and work.



As we head out to our first village today, **Union 2**, we trek through mud and puddles left from last night's downpour. It is cooler this morning, so I pray for a good turnout for our

last day. As we head up a hill we pass a couple with a three month old baby and ask for directions. We give them a ride for a short distance.

The first village is full of rambunctious little boys. One of them brought a baby rabbit to the meeting. They sang and were moved by the drama.

On the way to our last village, **La Cuerda**, we presented our translators, Wilmer and Ian with gifts of a journal. We pray they both will continue to follow The Lord with their lives, and hope to see them again next year.



The last village was fantastic. We fed over 150 people and the kids were very attentive to all we did. One of the pastors grandsons gave us this weird looking fruit to eat. We opened it and it was delicious and reminded me of lychee. When I asked what it was, it was in fact, lychee. I had just never seen it in its raw form before.

When we got back to the compound, we unpacked everything from the van and gave a little gift to a couple of the office workers. Our bags are much lighter as 90% of what we brought are blessings for the people that stay here. Steve will inventory everything left over and use it for evangelistic purposes in the months to come.

This year, my personal lesson to learn and apply is to “Be a blessing”. When I meet someone, it is my goal to bless them. Even a small thing like a word of encouragement to a worker, stopping to help someone, a smile and a joyful attitude when coupled with a “Jesus Loves You” or “May God Bless You” can be a small planted seed. It takes no time and God can use it to further His Kingdom, which was the reason for this trip in the first place!



We want to thank everyone who supported us financially and made this trip a reality. Your sacrificial gifts are now laid up in Heaven. We also want to thank those who prayed for us. Continue to pray for the people of Nicaragua that those seeds sown will be on good soil.

Bill, Karen & Shannon Itzel

