

**NICARAGUA  
COMPANION SYNOD  
TRAVEL  
HANDBOOK**



**2010 Edition**

## INDEX

<b>Background Information</b>	<b>p. 3</b>
<b>Planning Your Trip</b>	
Your group	p. 4
Getting Ready to Travel	p. 4
Costs	p. 5
Immunizations	p. 5
<b>While in Nicaragua</b>	
Relating to the Church	p. 6
Accommodations	p. 8
Eating & Drinking	p. 9
Other Health Issues	p. 9
Transportation	p. 9
Making Contact Back Home	p. 9
<b>What to Bring</b>	
In passport holder	p. 10
In luggage	p. 10
In carry-on	p. 11
<b>What to Leave with Someone at Home</b>	<b>p. 11</b>
<b>For Medical Groups</b>	<b>p. 12</b>
<b>Helpful Spanish Phrases</b>	<b>p. 13</b>
<b>Pre-trip Bible Studies &amp; Articles</b>	
Short-term Mission Trips	p. 14
Face to Face Mission	p. 18
A Holy Place	p. 24
<b>Other Resources</b>	<b>p. 25</b>
<b>Room for Notes</b>	<b>p. 26</b>
<b>Map of Nicaragua</b>	<b>p. 28</b>

The South Dakota Synod of the ELCA established a Companion Synod relationship with the Lutheran Church of Nicaragua, Faith and Hope at the SD Synod Assembly in June of 2000. The relationship was established with the purpose of exchanging encouragement in the faith and proclamation of the Gospel through correspondence and personal visits. The people of the South Dakota Synod ELCA and the ILFE further committed to lifting each other up and loving one another through prayers, correspondence, and education. The two churches have much to offer one another. Through the building of relationships and travel, each church has strengthened and grown.

### **The Lutheran Church of Nicaragua, Faith and Hope**

The Lutheran Church of Nicaragua, Faith and Hope (ILFE) was begun by Lutheran refugees from El Salvador who fled during the Civil War in their country. When the refugees returned to El Salvador, the Nicaraguans who received them decided to continue the Lutheran witness in their own communities. In June of 1994 the ILFE was received as a full member church of the Lutheran World Federation.

The ILFE works through what they call holistic ministry. Along with Word and Sacrament, church members reach out through development work in such areas as education, medicine, small business development and more.

Bishop Victoria Cortez is the president of the ILFE. The church is served primarily by lay pastors who live and work in the rural communities they serve. The church also has a strong presence among the poorest of the poor in Managua.

For more on the ILFE visit the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA website: <http://archive.elca.org/countrypackets/nicaragua/desc.html>

### **PLANNING YOUR COMPANION SYNOD TRIP**

- Groups should be no more than 12 people.
- Designate a group coordinator to be the primary communicator with the Synod, ILFE, short-term missionary, etc.
- Designate a financial record keeper. This person will manage cash flow, record group expenses and assist the in-country personnel.
- Work through the pre-trip Bible studies and information as a group to begin to build your group and prepare for being in Nicaragua. Plan to meet at least twice before you travel.
- Plan to hold devotions and a “de-briefing” session each day of your trip. Each group member could prepare a brief devotion to share. As a group you will talk about the highs and lows of each day’s experiences, share what you learned, how you grew; and what surprised you about each day. Pray for each other.
- Each person should prepare a brief bio to share. Share it with each other and with the short-term missionary before traveling. You might want to type them up in a “brochure” form. Tell about your profession, your family, and your interests.
- Choose a project from the identified project list in the Synod office. This has been developed in conjunction with the ILFE based on their priorities and goals.
- Check with the short-term missionary/ILFE if you are thinking about bringing donations. Some donations are very much needed and others might not be beneficial in Nicaragua’s cultural context. If groups bring any in-kind gifts, include an accurate inventory in Spanish to give to the ILFE.
- If you bring gifts of money include a letter to the ILFE stating the amount, your intent for the money’s use. Copy the letter to the Synod and DGM.

A guide for congregations using Vibrant Faith mission trip milestone ministry is available from the SDSynod..

## GETTING READY TO TRAVEL

- Get your passport or renew it if travel is within 6 months of the passport's expiration..
- The group leader should contact the Synod office to coordinate trip dates on the master trip calendar and with the ILFE. The ILFE members are on vacation in December and January, so they are not a good months to travel. All trips must be scheduled through the Synod, who then requests permission from ILFE to travel, in order to avoid scheduling conflicts.
- Contact a Travel Agent about airfare and reservations.
- The leader should communicate with the short-term missionary in Nicaragua to share information about group size, gender make-up of your group, any special interests, flight times, etc.
- Groups should plan to have the entire group arrive and depart Managua on the same flight.
- Get your immunizations if necessary.
- Break in your shoes.

## COSTS

- The largest cost is your airline ticket. Work with a travel agent to make arrangements. Generally, your flight choices will be through Houston, Atlanta or Miami. Rates can vary dramatically, but tickets range from **\$600 -- \$1150**.
- **\$100** per group member to give to the ILFE. Each person should bring this money in cash, preferably \$20's. It will be used to cover the cost of the ILFE hosting your trip, dormitory upkeep, vehicle repairs, etc. **\$50** per group member payable to the SD Synod to help with the support of the short-term missionary who will be hosting and translating for your group in Nicaragua. Send one check from your group to the Synod office.
- **\$250** per group member for meals, transportation, gas, entrance fees, bottled water and other group expenses in Nicaragua. This money will be pooled and kept track of by the group treasurer. If there is a balance, the money can be left with the ILFE to cover bus maintenance expenses or returned to the group members.
- Extra money for meals coming and going, \$5 to cover visa upon entering Nicaragua, money to have while traveling, money for souvenirs, and \$35 airport fee when leaving, etc.

Bring cash in denominations of \$20 or less- CRISP, NEW BILLS. American bills with pen marks, tears, ink stains, etc. are NOT accepted by Nicaraguan banks, therefore they are not accepted by anyone else. Traveler's checks are hard to cash. Cash machines are readily available and are a good option for taking out cash in Nicaraguan currency. You may need exactly \$35. Cash for your exit fee.

## IMMUNIZATIONS

There are no required immunizations for entering Nicaragua, but the following are strongly recommended:

- Hepatitis B
- Updated Tetanus
- Hepatitis A
- Malaria medicine (although if you are traveling during the dry season, there are few bugs. Check with the short-term missionary to see if this is necessary)
- Typhoid

Check the Centers for Disease Control website for the most current recommendations.

**In an emergency the hospital to be used in Managua is:**

Hospital Salud Integral **and their address is**

**Estatua Montoya 1c al lago, 1c abajo**

**Phone number: 2251-2030**

**<http://www.hospitalsaludintegral.com.ni/ccardiaco.htm>**

## WHILE IN NICARAGUA

### RELATING TO THE CHURCH

- The **primary purpose** of your trip will be to connect and form relationships with brothers and sisters of faith in Nicaragua. This is much more important than coming with gifts or planning to engage in projects. Most groups plan to stay in communities with Nicaraguan host families – a wonderful way to build bridges across cultures and meet new friends!
- Members of the ILFE will host you while in Nicaragua. While you may have a specific project you are doing, the ILFE will also have some places they will want you to visit and people they will want you to meet. The key to your trip is **FLEXIBILITY**. **Schedules and plans are subject to change at any time.**
- If your group plans to work on a project while in Nicaragua, please plan to stay together and to work together. Drivers and vehicles are very limited. Most groups do not work on projects because it creates extra work for ILFE staff, and often the short week or 10 days that delegations stay for is not enough time to accomplish anything long-term. If you are interested in a project, ask the short-term missionary in advance if there are any projects will be going on at the time. If an ILFE project coincides with the dates of your delegation, coordination **MIGHT** be a possibility. Your goal should be to gain understanding and build relationships, not buildings.
- Never go anywhere without an ILFE church member or Missionary Volunteer. Nicaragua is relatively safe, but you will be easily identified as a US citizen.
- Remember that you represent the Church in South Dakota. You are an ambassador. The people you meet will form impressions about US citizens and Lutherans in South Dakota based on you.
- If you are carrying a financial gift or in-kind gifts for the Church, present them in a public setting. With a financial gift, announce what it is for. The gifts should be presented to the highest-ranking person from the church present at the gathering. The missionary volunteer will help choose the most appropriate time. **If you would like to bring a financial gift, check with the Synod for ILFE designated priorities.**
- A small gift for Bishop Victoria Cortez is appropriate if you choose to do so. This may be something unique to South Dakota or

something for her work as the president of the church. It need not be expensive. The group leader should present this gift.

- The ILFE discourages gifts to individual communities or people. If you have in-kind gifts present them to one of the leaders in Managua who will distribute them fairly to the communities. **Make no promises to anyone about aid or in-kind gifts. The ILFE has designated project priorities.**
- The ILFE also discourages giving to beggars, (You will be approached as people will know you are from the US), because they would like to help people move to having more sustainable incomes.
- Prepare a couple of songs to share for worship or group settings. Hymns and other church songs are appropriate as would be American folk songs.
- The group leader should be prepared to bring a greeting from your delegation, but can also bring a greeting from the SD Synod. Pastors may be asked to offer prayers, benedictions, or even brief homilies.
- During worship services be prepared to give an offering. It should be in proportion to what the congregation members give which means \$1-\$2 or the change in córdobas you have in your pocket.



## ACCOMODATIONS

The ILFE encourages groups to stay at their retreat center in Managua. The retreat center is rustic – like summer camp.

The sleeping rooms are dormitory style. There are bathrooms with showers, but the water may not be running all the time. Water is stored in a big tank. You may end up taking “bucket” showers and flushing the toilet with a bucket. There is also an outhouse.

Sheets and pillow are provided. Bring a light blanket.

You can arrange for laundry to be done for a modest cost by the family that manages the retreat center.

Staying at the retreat center will give you an idea of how some families in Nicaragua live. You actually will have better accommodations than most families.

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While the Synod and ILFE encourage groups to stay at the retreat center, some groups have stayed in a local hotel. The cost of the hotel would be additional costs for travel. One of the hotels is:

Hotel Casa San Juan  
Apartado 5732  
Managua  
Phone: 011-505-278-3220  
Fax: 011-505-267-0419

The short term missionary would have the name of one or two others.

Breakfast is usually provided for a modest cost; laundry service as well. The hotel will have only sheets on the beds, so you may want to bring a light blanket.

The custom is to leave your room key at the desk when you leave, so do not leave valuables in your room; put them in the hotel safe.

## EATING AND DRINKING

- Wash your hands often. You may want to bring antibacterial wipes and/or hand sanitizer.
- Drink only bottled (in sealed bottles) or boiled water. Avoid tap water, fountain drinks, and ice cubes.
- Eat only thoroughly cooked food or fruits and vegetables you have peeled. Avoid salads.
- Eat dairy products only if sure they are pasteurized.
- Brush your teeth with bottled water.

## OTHER HEALTH ISSUES

- Use insect repellent if in areas with mosquitoes.
- If you take prescription medication, bring enough to last for the whole trip.
- Bring sun block, hat, sunglasses, chap stick, and lotion.
- Do not go barefoot.
- Do not handle animals.
- Avoid scented products that could attract mosquitoes.
- Check with your medical insurance to see if and how you are covered overseas.
- Bring Imodium AD and celebrate if you don't have to use it!

## TRANSPORTATION

- The ILFE will provide transportation for your group. This may be on an old school bus, in the back of a pickup truck or cargo truck. You likely will not have a seatbelt and the ride will be rough.

## MAKING CONTACT BACK HOME

- It will be hard to make regular contact with people back home. You may have a chance to send email or make a quick phone call, but don't count on it.
- Tell your friends and family “no news is good news.” If they don't hear from you, it means things are okay.

## WHAT TO BRING

### In Passport holder:

- Passport
- 2<sup>nd</sup> form of picture ID
- Airline ticket/e-tickets
- Credit card/debit card to use in cash machine
- \$250 to pool for group expenses (in cash in denominations of \$20 or less)
- \$100 to give to the ILFE.
- Miscellaneous spending money
- Cash for travel –you will need \$5 for entrance visa ( \$35 for exit visa is usually covered in plane ticket costs)
- Consent to travel form if under age 18 traveling without parent
- Medical insurance card

### In luggage:

- Clothes – casual is fine. In Nicaragua it is okay for women to wear shorts or slacks. Bring something to wear for attending worship (can be casual).
- Comfortable shoes
- Light jacket
- Toiletries/mirror
- Swimsuit
- Bandana
- Towel
- Lightweight blanket
- Camera and batteries or charger, memory stick or film
- Sunscreen/Insect repellent/lip balm
- Sun glasses and hat
- Antidiarrheal medicine
- Antibacterial hand gel and/or wipes
- “Leatherman” type tool or pocket knife (in checked luggage)
- Backpack
- Pictures of yourself and family, hometown, etc. to share with your host family during your home stay. You may wish to bring an extra photo or two to leave with the family, as leaving gifts for individuals is strongly discouraged by the ILFE.
- Band aids/first aid cream

- Flip flops for the shower
- Wide mouth water bottle
- Gatorade or flavored powder to add to your water
- Earplugs for light sleepers- there are roosters on the farm that have no internal clocks and crow throughout the night and there are roommates who snore.

### For staying at the retreat center your group may want:

- Garbage bags
- Flashlight
- Extra toilet paper
- Duct tape

### In Carry-on:

- Copy of passport kept separate from your passport
- The address and phone number of the ILFE. Some customs officials have asked for the address of where staying. See below under contact information for address.
- Any prescription medicines
- Change of clothes
- Notebook/journal and pens
- Pocket Bible/devotional book
- Spanish/English Dictionary or phrase book
- Granola bars/crackers/etc.
- Small photo book with pictures/postcards of family, South Dakota landmarks, church, workplace, etc.
- **ANYTHING YOU DON'T WANT TO HAVE LOST OR NOT HAVE WHEN YOU ARRIVE!**

A traveler's form should be given to your trip leader with critical medical information in case of an emergency.

A waiver of liability should be left with the SD synod.

### LEAVE WITH FAMILY/FRIEND AT HOME

- A copy of your passport picture page
- Travel schedule
- List of local contacts for each member of your group
- Contact numbers and email
  - ILFE phone: 011-505-266-4467; fax: 011-505-266-4609; email: [luterana@turbonett.com.ni](mailto:luterana@turbonett.com.ni)
  - Short term missionary: [ae.bjerke@hotmail.com](mailto:ae.bjerke@hotmail.com)  
Cathy Larson ; Home office 605/3350483; email: [clarson@augie.edu](mailto:clarson@augie.edu)
- Mailing address of the ILFE: Apartado Postal P-151, Las Piedrecitas, Managua, Nicaragua.
- Street address of the ILFE: de la Estatua Monseñor Lezcano 6 cuadras y media al Lago  
Translation: from the Monsignor Lezcno statue, 6 1/2 blocks towards the lake (Lake Managua)

### FOR MEDICAL GROUPS

- Let the church know how many days you are prepared to hold clinics.
- Get started very early on planning, because you will need to file papers with the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa) at least 2 months before arrival.
- You will need to send the short-term missionary copies of all doctors and nurses' medical licenses, lists of all medications brought from the US, all with expiration dates no less than 6 months from the time you will arrive, letter of introduction from your church on official letterhead, etc. If you do bring vitamins, medicine, or equipment, include an accurate inventory of everything the group brings. MINSa requirements are subject to change, so be in touch with your short-term missionary.
- You should plan on bringing money to purchase medications for your clinics. The recommended amount is \$500/day of seeing people. At least two weeks in advance let the church know how much money you are bringing.
- Contact the short-term missionary about purchasing medications in Nicaragua. The ILFE will buy the medications

in Nicaragua for the conditions you will treat. They are familiar with what you might see and what you would need. Buying the medicine in Nicaragua helps the local economy and you can also get more medicine for the money.

- You can bring patient information sheets. The sheets should include columns for name, age, date, complaints/problems, and treatment/prescriptions.
- Plan on having one translator for each person diagnosing if the consultants don't speak Spanish. Contact the short-term missionary regarding translation.
- Groups that plan to do consultations in Nicaragua should take into strong consideration their group size. They may wish to limit the size of the group to only the medical personnel and two or three others who will help fill prescriptions, test vision and interact with families. ( Large numbers of people who are not involved in the consultations and who do not have a translator to help them meet and learn about life in the community often feel that they have little to contribute.)





## HELPFUL SPANISH PHRASES

Hola (oh-la)	Hello
Buenas días	Good morning
Buenas tardes	Good afternoon
Buenas noches	Good evening/night
Adiós	Good-bye
Hasta luego	See you later
Hasta Mañana	See you tomorrow
Señor	Mr.
Señora	Mrs.
Señorita	Ms. or Miss
Don	Title of respect for men
Doña	Title of respect for women
Lo siento	I'm sorry
Permiso	Excuse me
Por favor	Please
Gracias	Thank you
De nada	You're welcome
No es nada	It's nothing
Mucho gusto	Pleased to meet you
El gusto es mio	The pleasure is mine
Igualmente	Likewise
Mi nombre es	My name is
Cómo se llama?	What is your name?
Cómo está?	How are you?
Bien	Good
Mas o menos	So-so
Feliz	happy
Servicio	Bathroom
Ducha/baño	shower
Comida	food

## MAP OF NICARAGUA



## PRE-TRIP ARTICLES AND BIBLE STUDIES

As you plan for your trip, please read the following articles and Bible studies that will help you to process your experience and prepare you for what you are doing.

### Short-term Mission Trips

By Paul Jeffrey

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Subscriptions: \$49/year from PO Box 378, Mt. Morris, IL 61054. 1-800-208-4097

After Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, hundreds of volunteer mission teams descended on Nicaragua and Honduras. Many came from churches in the United States. At times the region's threadbare airports were filled with herds of North Americans wearing T-shirts with slogans like "Jesus for Honduras," "Mission to Nicaragua 2000" and "Christ Loves Central America." Ushered past beggars into waiting vans, these church people embarked on an adventure of solidarity that marks a shift in how we understand mission.

The concept of sending mission teams for short-term work has grown increasingly popular in U.S. congregations. People are not excited about sending their dollars off to faceless mission agencies; they want to become personally involved. Encouraged by the testimony of others who have had a life-changing experience in a Third World country, they want to "do mission" themselves.

Two other influences—the spread of the internet and the increasing popularity of direct covenant relationships between churches—have diffused the role of denominational agencies. Plotting denominational mission strategies has become more difficult, in part because mainline mission executives first tried to ignore this paradigm shift, then tried in vain to shape it. Today most accept the decentralizing trend as a legitimate movement that needs to be nudged in the right direction.

Latin Americans have had to take account of the changes too. Gone are the days of receiving block grants, and North American churches generally have less money to give. At the same time, denominations have more personnel to send, especially as short-term

volunteers. Instead of filling out project applications and evaluation, Latin American churches and development groups have had to learn how to host North Americans and tolerate their often paternalistic behavior in order to shake loose money for programming.

The volunteers' money is likely to be designated for projects that have caught their fancy. This isn't necessarily all bad. It may foster greater accountability. And, as affluent volunteers and congregations back home get excited about seeing that their surplus wealth can make a difference, the new pattern of giving may yield more money.

Yet there is a downside. North Americans often come seeking the emotional rewards of hands-on involvement rather than a way to make an investment in long-term empowerment. A United Methodist mission team from South Carolina came to Los Estribo, a poor village in southern Honduras, and insisted on handing out \$50 in US money to each family (single mothers excluded) despite objections by local church workers. In view of such insensitivity, some local churches refuse to cooperate with mission teams, and insist on working only with those development and evangelistic practices that empower the poor without exposing them to the embarrassing rich.

Other groups accept the fact that the short-term volunteer mission trips are likely to remain popular, and aim to reach the volunteers with a deeper form of the gospel. They come here thinking they're going to give something to us, but many discover that instead they receive, from people who have almost nothing, a new experience of hope, faith and love," says Damaris Albuquerque, executive director of the Nicaraguan Council of Churches. Many team members are changed by the experience. Although they've volunteered in order to do something for the poor, their paternalism comes apart when they meet articulate poor people who often believe in God more than they do and who want a world where North-South relations are characterized by justice rather than charity.

A central task of program coordinators is to facilitate the encounter. A good start is to help volunteers overcome the "edifice-complex" by down-playing the notion that what's most important for the group is the classroom or clinic or house that they're going to build and emphasizing that the real purpose is pastoral accompaniment.

In the past two or three years, 2000 volunteers came to Honduras as part of a Church World Service reconstruction program designed to break the bad habits of other volunteer programs. A few

participants were veterans of as many as two dozen volunteer trips. They'd paved parish driveways in Costa Rica and repaired clinic roofs in Jamaica. But Honduras was the first place where they worked alongside local folks.

Why has it taken so long? Why do we send volunteers out into the world to work for the poor when they could be working with the poor? Fault lies with both North and South, yet it's time to change. It's time to quit treating volunteers as spoiled children and get them out of fancy hotels and into tents and dirt-floored chapels in the countryside and urban barrios.

Some work team chaperones will argue they can't push people that far out of their comfort zones. I believe we've got to stop protecting volunteers from interacting with the poor. Taking two dozen volunteer trips without working side-by-side with the poor is not mission. As long as the poor remain objects of volunteer trips rather than joint subjects in a common enterprise of faith, it's never going to be mission.

It may be hard for some Latin American hosts to change the pattern. They've practiced their smiles and learned not to take offense at insensitivity. In exchange they receive personal rewards. They are invited to speak in North America. Their kids obtain scholarships in the North, and they live well while the North Americans are in town. Volunteer groups should not provide employment to local gringo wannabe elites – or northern missionaries living in the South – who act in the name of the poor but actually erect barriers to true encounters because such encounters would threaten their privileged role as interlocutors.

People who live in villages affected by Hurricane Mitch have had a great experience hosting church teams that helped them rebuild. When they talk about the visitors, they do not begin by describing the buildings that were built, but emphasize that they felt accompanied and sustained by the volunteers. At a time of great trauma, the poor felt important and loved when the overloaded church van pulled in among the shacks.

"They didn't come to tell us how to do things, which is what the gringos have always done in the past," said Toribio Dubon, a peasant leader in Nueva Victoria, a rebuilt village in the Honduran province of Santa Barbara. "These people came to sweat in the sun with us, to listen, to treat us as equals. We felt blessed by their presence beside us."

According to Don Tatlock, coordinator of the CWS program in Honduras, if housing was the sole priority, church leaders "could ask folks to stay home and just send us the money they were going to spend on airplane tickets...What's more important are the relationships they build with the poor and what they learn about why people are poor. And by giving up their time and money to come so far, they're conveying a sense of love that pays off in increased self-esteem and encouragement among villagers."

Nurturing healthy encounters requires work at both ends of the journey. Church workers in the South face the complex challenge of empowering peasants in the countryside or urban barrio dwellers to host an encounter in a way that allows them to feel equal to the northerners. Bridging the gap by spiritualizing poverty doesn't work; that's only a cheap trick to romanticize the misery of others. What then do the poor in the South really have to offer to affluent northerners? Southerners need to reflect together on this question; otherwise reciprocity will remain elusive.

The theologies of liberation that emerged from this region in the '70s and '80s evolved from the organized poor, who suffered repression at the hands of economic elites and their US-financed military forces. Today the relevant theologies are those that emerge from the excluded – the poor who have no place in a globalized economy. They are not repressed so much as simply treated as nonpersons. Who is God for them? If we from the North are to open up our own spiritual and theological lives to refreshment from the South, we must get close to the people who ask that question.

As part of their experience, volunteers must wrestle with the question of today's poor. One of the major tasks facing the US church today is giving folks the tools with which to process and interpret their firsthand encounters with economic and racial disparities that characterize our hemisphere. We need curriculum that will prepare work teams for the trip theologically and culturally, and guide them through a process of discerning changes in their lives after they return.

Early in 2002 the Mennonite Central Committee will release "Connecting Peoples," a guide for pastors and local church leaders who want to lead groups or establish sistering relationships. According to Daryl Yoder Botrager, co-director of the MCC's Latin America-Caribbean Department, the guide will include suggestions for converting the trip into concrete solidarity at home.

We need to help returning volunteers convert their emotional experience into action: promoting the purchase of fair-trade coffee, working to close the School of the Americas, educating others about the complex realities of hemispheric relations. Otherwise, participants who feel a need to “do something” will return to paternalistic models, send money once or twice to particular families or congregations in the community they visited, and then forget them.

This integration of political responses will be easier if the entire church family becomes involved in the volunteer movement. Many volunteer programs around the US have been scorned by progressives, who see such work trips as paternalistic and politically unsophisticated. Yet charity and justice need each other. If people of varied ideological backgrounds participate, the volunteers’ experiences will be enhanced. Despite what some consider the deficiencies of the movement, it is here to stay, and the responsibility for making it a force for long-lasting change in both the South and the North falls on the entire church community.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

Read Luke 24: 13-35

*The Road to Emmaus*

1) *Jesus accompanies two grieving people on the road, sharing Word and Sacrament with them. What does it mean to accompany our companion synods? What does it mean to do mission with, not for, them?*

2) *What has your view of missions been? How does this article challenge or affirm that view?*

### **Face-to-Face Mission**

By Dwayne J. Westermann  
(Used by permission)

The headman of the *Msitu wa Tembo* Lutheran Parish (*Msitu wa Tembo* means “forest of elephants”) is a diminutive man, unusually short for a Maasai. He is no more than 50, but you would think, to look at his wizened face and gnarled hands, that he is very old indeed, bent and weathered. He is responsible for the welfare of this small village in northern Tanzania, East Africa.

When I first visited him, it was in the midst of severe drought; the land was parched and cracked. In this normally verdant savannah, only the thorny Acacia trees gave a hint of green vegetation. We stood talking near the village’s thatched-roofed church while the dust devils swirled around us. I inquired about the health of his family. Tears filled his eyes as he told me that his wife and his children were managing. “Except for my youngest son,” he added, his chin quivering. “Is he ill?” I asked. “No,” he told me, “he is dead, now two months.” The grief-etched creases in his face caught the blowing soil, making him look even older.

Forest of Elephants Lutheran Parish was suffering through the worst drought in a decade. Everything and everyone in the village were covered with the same rust-colored dust that aged the headman’s face. Though one had only to look up from the village to see the majestic, ice-capped peak of “The Mountain” not so many miles distant, the snows of Kilimanjaro brought no relief here. Ezekiel would have recognized the place with the scattered, whitening bones of cattle baking in the equatorial sun (Ezek. 37:2). *Msitu wa Tembo* had been emptied of men and older boys who had taken their starving cattle to find pasture many kilometers distant; only old men, women, and children remained.

“I’m so sorry for the loss of your son,” I told my host. “How old was he?” “He was 12 years old,” the father said. “And he was a very good boy; he helped me a lot in the *shamba* (garden) and with the cows. He was a very good son to me.” “Malaria?” I asked. That was a likely bet, since malaria takes so many children here. But the headman shook his head and his eyes filled up again. “No,” he said softly. “He was taken by...” he paused and shuddered as he sucked in a deep breath, expelling the words in a whisper, “...a *mamba*.” A crocodile! Dear God! A crocodile had taken his boy! With the drought, the village water supply was gone, and he had sent his young son to what was left of the river to fetch water some three kilometers away. The boy had leaned over the river’s bank to fill his bucket. Then, in an instantaneous and lethal explosion of water and reptile, he was snatched away! It was not until three days later when searchers found remains down river that they were able to confirm what had happened.

### **Extraordinary Faith**

All I could do was stand there dumbstruck and shake my head. Pastors are always supposed to have ready words of comfort and consolation; but never in more than 25 years of ministry had I been confronted with a grieving father who had lost his child to a crocodile! I could not think of a thing to say that would not be a mere splotch of salve on a gaping wound. Was it not enough that these poor people must live in such terrible circumstances, struggling with hunger and drought? And then to have your boy taken by, of all things, a crocodile!

As I stood there mute, this father ministered to me. He took both my hands in his and, after a long moment, said, "*Mpendwa rafiki katika Kristo*" (Dear friend in Christ), thank you for sharing my grief, but let us remember that all things are in God's hands." Jesus' words about the centurion at Capernaum echoed in the near-empty village of *Msitu wa Tembo*, "...not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10).

There are many such stories of extraordinary faith that are readily recounted by those who have come to know and love the Lutheran Christian people of Tanzania or those of other developing countries, people who rely on their faith as the first and sometimes only line of defense in a daily struggle for survival. That visit to *Msitu wa Tembo* and the many people and places I have visited since have provided a deeply fulfilling source of personal renewal. In this unforgiving land where rivers can conceal lurking death, we have discovered that "river of living water" (John 7:38) from which we thirsty people are warmly welcomed to drink.

Paradoxically, ours is a thirst that grows from a flood of plenty in our nation. It is when we spend time with those who daily endure the crushing burden of poverty and have only their faith in God to sustain them that we begin to understand why Jesus so often spoke of the danger of wealth and the way to true treasure (Matt 19: 21-24).

### **Sharing My Experiences**

My overseas experiences were a source of faith renewal I very much wanted to share with my congregation, because I sensed there were many thirsty people there, too. Attempting to do so proved frustrating in the extreme. Oh, to be sure, our congregation's members politely received the slides and travelogues. "Thank you for that nice program," they would say, and then they kindly took up an

offering for whatever my cause *du jour* was – hunger relief, scholarships, a grain mill.

But, as gracious and sympathetic as they were, they did not understand, through no fault of their own, what I wanted most to share with them. Slides, even accompanied by the most passionate narration, do convince people, but only of the fact that *you* had a wonderful experience, that somehow the experience renewed *your* faith. It is not possible to teach an experience. The attempt to do so only leaves thirsty people wishing it could be so for them. We cannot quench *their* thirst by describing the wonderful drink *we* were privileged to have.

That is why the congregation began "Lutheran Safaris." It has become my privilege once a year to take a group of 12-20 people to experience this life-changing adventure for themselves. We call it "incarnational mission," mission in the flesh, being there as students and companions. With partner staff in Africa, our congregation works together to help each group of travelers begin to gain an understanding of what life is like for our friends there, to see it with their own eyes, to worship in thatched-roofed churches, visit villages, hospitals, schools, and homes. We hear lectures on the economy, the political situation, food security, and the role of the church in the lives of the people. And, yes, we do go "on safari" to see the wonderful animals of East Africa (always a highlight, but rarely the experience that people most cherish).

During our time together with our African friends, we try to reflect biblically and theologically on what it all means. We try to provide opportunities for our travelers to consider what actions they might personally take in response to this plunge into another world. The incarnational mission approach is essentially a three-step process:

(1) We go, see, and listen to experience something of what it means to live in a developing country. Of course, this is a very limited exposure. We do not pretend to suggest that having made a two-week foray into another country, we know what it is like for our friends to live out their daily lives there. But we do understand a great deal more than we did. For most first-time travelers, even this brief introduction is nothing less than an amazing revelation.

(2) Throughout the course of our travels, we try to reflect on our experiences from a biblical perspective. How does the Word of God speak to what we have seen and heard? How is God's Word

understood by our partners, and how might that be instructive for us? What new insight can be gained from listening to the Word in this very different cultural context?

(3) Toward the end of our trip, we ask two questions: What difference will this experience make in my life? And What difference could this experience make in the lives of those I met? Travelers are invited to consider actions they may want to take in response to what they have seen and heard and how they have understood that biblically and theologically. Actions may include changes in one's own lifestyle, a material response on behalf of our partners, a desire to find ways to continue developing the friendships made, or an eagerness to tell others about what they have learned.

### **Lifetime Commitments**

These three steps – experiencing, reflecting, and acting – lead most participants to a serious reconsideration of their own lifestyles, to a commitment to learn more, to deeper biblical insight, and to a continuing engagement with these partners in the future. We hope this also leads them to repeat the process at a more profound level. The new insight and renewed faith our travelers gain have been translated not only into changed lifestyles and material support for our friends in Tanzania, but also into an enthusiasm for many facets of mission and outreach in our own congregation and to encouraging other members to join them in local efforts. It is one thing to have the pastor show some slides and prattle on about the value and importance of mission, of seeing beyond the walls of our own congregation, of caring for the poor, and about the renewal of faith that grows from that. It is quite another to have members of the congregation who have experienced it for themselves, thought it through, and acted on what they have learned saying the same thing. In this case the old adage is reversed; it is a word from such an enthused member that is worth a thousand pictures!

As we travel together, meet and talk with people, develop personal friendships, and see with our own eyes how others live and struggle to survive, all the while keeping the faith, our Lutheran Safaris travelers will say over and over again, "I just had no idea! Of course, you see the pictures and read the statistics, but actually knowing these people, and having them as friends, that's very different. Now poverty has a face and a name. This is my friend

we're talking about who is trying to feed her family on a dollar a day! And I want to do something about that."

In saying that, these travelers have identified the single, biggest barrier to helping congregations reach out beyond their own walls. It is not that we are selfish and unwilling to share the good gifts with which God has blessed us. It is simply that most of us have no accurate idea of how life is for people in developing countries. We do not understand because we have no personal experience of that reality.

While our Division for Global Mission and Lutheran World Relief do a superb job of providing educational materials, there is something more we can do to build on the information they provide us. What is needed is the creation of personal relationships with people who live these lives about which we read. It is one thing to hear the 800 million people in our world are chronically malnourished. It is quite another to *know* some of those people personally, to share a meal with a family who may not eat tomorrow, to become friends, to stand in the drought-stricken village and hear about the child who was taken by a crocodile.

### **Is It Good Stewardship?**

This question always arises: Is this approach good stewardship? Would it not be better to take the money that these trips cost and direct it to world hunger or some other global ministry? There was a time when I would have agreed, but now, having been there, having had my life dramatically changed and having witnessed the same change in others time and again, here is my answer:

- One couple who paid the \$2,300 each for the two-week trip ended up giving over \$150,000 for the building of an elementary school for disabled children in Tanzania.
- Another couple committed to funding a Tanzanian student for medical school.
- Over \$85,000 has been pledged in the last three years to our American God Parent Scholarship Program to assist African students.
- Our congregation built a 21-station computer lab and partnered with nearby Roanoke College to create an annual foreign studies program at a Lutheran secondary school in Tanzania.

- Our Virginia Synod youth have funded construction of a multi-pond fish farm at a youth vocational training center as a direct outgrowth of these trips.
- Two or our Lutheran Safaris travelers have returned to Africa as teachers.
- Many others have been compelled to put their fervor to work in local mission and outreach to people in need.
- Our congregation's giving to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal has substantially increased.

In our parish, and in other parishes that have participated in these trips, lives have been changed. In learning to know fellow Lutherans who struggle daily just to survive, we discover that survival is first and foremost a matter of faith in the God who provides what we need. We learn that we, who are wealthy in the world, have been given these blessings by God as a trust, an inheritance, to be shared with those in need. We learn that this is God's plan; this is how God intends the world to work! And we learn that we need these wonderful friends as much or more than they need us. That is stewardship. That is incarnational mission.

If mission outreach is to hold deeper meaning for our members and for us as professional leaders, we need to go out; we need to take our people out to meet those who can teach us and for whom we are asked to care. We need to be open to being taught by them, because they so often understand the power of faith far better than we.

One does not have to travel all the way to East Africa to find such teachers. They are close by, in the inner cities, on the reservations, in the Appalachian Mountains, just across the border in Mexico, members of our companion Synods. Go and visit them. Become friends, companions, partners in Christ!

I often think of my friend at Forest of Elephants Lutheran Parish and of the grief he bears. The day after he rendered me speechless with the news of his little boy having been snatched by the crocodile, it occurred to me that I should have reminded him of Jesus' promise in John 10, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them...and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." But he already knew that. Truth is, he's the one who taught me that.

**Questions for discussion:**

- 1) *What are your expectations of your trip to Nicaragua?*
- 2) *Has reading this article changed any of your expectations?*
- 3) *What do you hope to give on this trip? What do you hope to receive?*
- 4) *What makes you most anxious as you prepare to travel? What makes you the most excited?*

**Read Ephesians 2: 11-22**

*Paul writes about the Jews and Gentiles being separated, but in Christ Jesus, strangers have become one in the Body of Christ. In our day the rich and the poor are greatly separated, but Christ has broken down the wall. We are no longer strangers, but one.*

- 1) *What kind of walls do you expect to encounter on this trip? How might you begin to tear down the walls that divide?*
- 2) *What will it mean to you to be friends with someone who lives vastly differently from you? What will that friendship mean when you leave Nicaragua?*

**A Holy Place**

By Dr. Richard Jensen

(Traveled to Nicaragua in February 2004)

It was our second full day in Nicaragua. We had just finished our third clinic, and were requested to drive a few blocks out of our way to see an old woman who was too ill to come to see us. We got in the bus, and drove the few blocks to the bottom of a hill. Several of us got out and used a flashlight to safely climb to her home.

We found a small wooden building at the top of the hill, with a man waiting outside to greet us. We entered the building and found an old woman lying on a simple bed made from two boards. A colorful blanket covered her body, and a scarf covered her head. We said hello and offered to examine her. It did not take long to determine that she was dying of end-stage liver disease. She looked more than 90 years old, but informed us that she was 53.

Her voice was amazingly strong, and she said that she had little pain. She also told us that she possessed more than all the riches of the world, because she had Christ.

One of our group suggested we take a picture before we left, so I volunteered. I looked around the room to get the best perspective for the picture, when it suddenly struck me that we were standing in a stable. I looked through the viewfinder, and there at the top of the picture, above the woman, was a picture of Christ, attached to the wall.

I took the picture, but as we left I realized, that we had indeed been invited to a holy place.

*Read Matthew 2: 1-2, 10-11*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

**Questions for Discussion:**

1) *The wise men expected to find Jesus in the great capital of Israel, but found him in the tiny town of Bethlehem. Dr. Jensen discovered Jesus in a humble home that was more like a farm shed. Have you ever seen Jesus in an unexpected place?*

2) *As you prepare to travel to Nicaragua, how can you prepare yourself to be open to seeing Jesus in that place and in the people? Do you think others might find Jesus in you?*

**OTHER RESOURCES**

"Travel Wise"

Synod booklet on mission trips mostly geared to Cameroon

**Web Sites:**

<http://archive.elca.org/countrypackets/nicaragua/desc.html>

This website has specific information about Nicaragua, the Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope, and advocacy issues.

[www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)

Lots of information on Nicaragua

[http://nicaragua.usembassy.gov/traveling\\_in\\_nicaragua.html](http://nicaragua.usembassy.gov/traveling_in_nicaragua.html)

The US Embassy in Nicaragua has travel updates, immunization recommendations, and country information

To contact the US Embassy: [consularmanagu@state.gov](mailto:consularmanagu@state.gov)

phone: 011-505-266-6010

fax: 011-505-266-9943)

**Books:**

Blood of Brothers, Stephen Kinzer

Published by Putnam, out of print

may be available on-line or in used book stores

Beyond Guilt, George S. Johnson

Mission at the Margins, Tony Gittins

Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle, Thomas W. Walker

Reading the Bible through Third World Eyes, Robert McAfee Brown

**People:**

Other people who have traveled. Contact the SD Synod office to be in touch with others who have been to Nicaragua.

Short-term missionary in Nicaragua. They can answer questions and give further suggestions for reading or other information.



## NOTES