

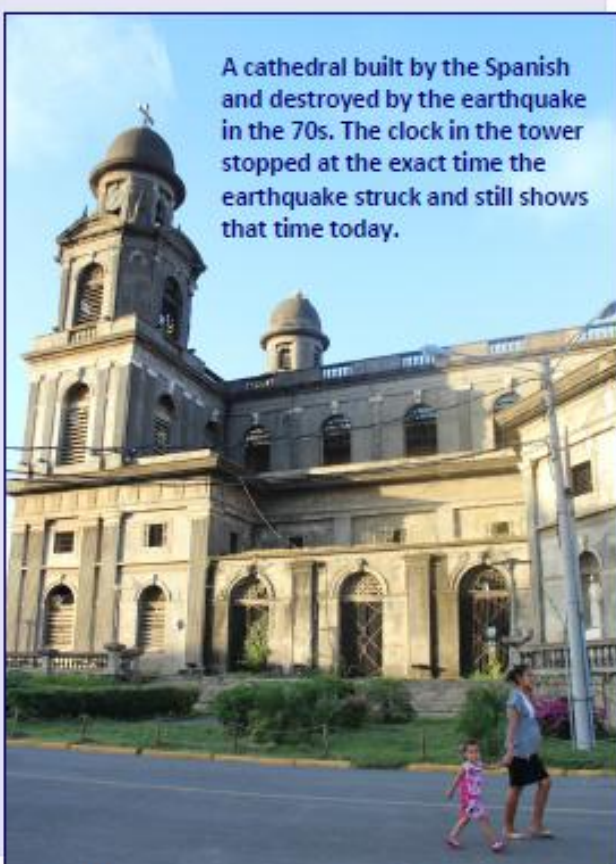
*Partnership visit to the Evangelical Methodist Church in Nicaragua
November 2014*

Nicaragua is a beautiful land of lakes and volcanoes, but beneath this beauty lies the continuous threat of earthquakes. The last devastating earthquake occurred in 1972 and destroyed Managua's city centre. The country continues to experience smaller earthquakes throughout the year. Managua is a very flat city, with few high rise buildings. The country does not have the finances to invest in earthquake-proof structures in the same way as other countries might, so few tall buildings are constructed and residential homes are generally bungalow-style houses. Another devastating earthquake is expected to occur in the near future, so Nicaraguans feel that the best thing they can do is build their homes as close to the ground as possible.



When Ken and Marion Howcroft and I arrived in Nicaragua for Ken's presidential overseas visit, the country was in the throes of celebrating the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception, and it was clear that the government had invested a substantial amount in public displays and alters

dedicated to Mary, as well as special food parcel distribution to participants. The slogan they had created to mark the occasion was *Nicaragua Unida en los brazos de Maria* or 'Nicaragua-united in the arms of Mary'. A strange slogan, given that 30% of Nicaraguans are practising evangelicals!



A cathedral built by the Spanish and destroyed by the earthquake in the 70s. The clock in the tower stopped at the exact time the earthquake struck and still shows that time today.

Nicaragua is currently considered the poorest nation in Spanish-speaking Central America. Its economy was devastated by the Sandinista-Contra war in the 80s and 90s, the physical and emotional consequences of which are still being felt by today's Nicaraguans. However the levels of gang-related crime and violence experienced in Nicaragua are nowhere near as high as in some of its Central American neighbours and the Nicaraguans we met insisted it was a relatively safe country in comparison.

Some of the issues that affect the nation include child poverty and the large numbers of children living on the streets, as well as a badly paid agricultural sector and poverty in rural Nicaragua. The use of drugs is also on the increase, particularly glue sniffing and other similar drugs among Nicaraguan youths.

The church pastors at Ken's workshop on the Trinity



The Evangelical Methodist Church in Nicaragua

This is an emerging church, established in 1996 with support from CIEMAL (the Council of Latin American Evangelical Methodist Churches) and the UMC's GBGM (General Board of Global Ministries), and has a membership of over 3000. The Methodist Church in Britain has been supporting the church over a number of years through various grants and participation in round-table meetings with other Central American partners. A

key focus in the last few years has been to help the church in capacity building and leadership training. The church has 19 pastors, including three ordained ministers. The head of church is Pastor Eduardo Rodriguez.

It was a joy for me to experience my first visit as partnership coordinator in Nicaragua. As we visited various projects and local churches, it became clear to us that a major focus for the church is on children and youth and through them influencing and changing Nicaraguan society, through Gospel values and evangelism.

In one church, we meet a group of young people on fire for Jesus and passionate about sharing this with other youths and bringing them to Christ. Some evangelism techniques don't change across cultures: food and refreshments were usually involved in their outreach! Neither do some of the concerns of the young

From right to left : Ken Howcroft, Eduardo Rodriguez, Alfredo Lopez and Marion Howcroft



people: they were concerned about being both heard by the adults in their church as well as receiving guidance from them concerning various issues that affect them such as relationships and how to live as a Christian in their society.

We saw so much when we were there, and met so many wonderful people doing amazing things for Christ's namesake. This report will therefore be told through



Young people from the Good Samaritan Methodist Church dance praising

the people we met and the work we saw them doing for God.

Pablo Lezama, National in Mission Appointment postholder & Eliezer Montiel, Sunday School Teacher



The IGLEMEN is a young church in terms of years of existence as well as its membership. The first inkling we got of this is when we attended the workshop led by National in Mission Appointments postholder, Pablo Lezama, Sunday School Coordinator, as he led a training workshop for Sunday School teachers. All of these Sunday School teachers were under 30 years old, and the youngest may have been about 16 or 17. The training was on how to make the bible relevant to the context in which Nicaraguan children lived, to help them live out their faith in this challenging environment.

The teachers were so passionate about the work they do, and one Sunday School teacher, a 19 year old called Eliezer, sent me some photos of the work he does through puppets at his Sunday School. The love he and the other teachers had for the children they work with was evident.



Eliezer Montiel



Pastor Rosa, Children's Church Pastor

Pastor Rosa pastors a church where 90% of the congregation is under 10 years old! Children were involved in every stage of the service, from the Bible reading to the worship to the act of thanksgiving. I could not believe how well behaved most of the children were during the service and the preaching, sat on their little colourful plastic chairs, and how many got up to take the microphone and say 'thank you' to

God for various things during the act of thanksgiving. What was even more wonderful to learn was that the few adults who were there (they must have been no older than 30) had in effect been evangelised to by their children-the children had found their way to this church and the parents had followed them! After the children were nourished spiritually they were then nourished physically with a typical Nicaraguan staple meal of beans, meat and rice. Pastor Rosa served the children generous portions, which I think reflected her generous and giving heart and the heart of those few adults serving in the church.



Ken preaching at the church

Ana Patricia, Sewing ministry and Children's Church Pastor



This is Pastor Ana Patricia, a young woman passionate for Christ and for serving her community, who out of love and concern for the welfare of women in her neighbourhood has blurred the boundaries between her personal life and space and her ministry. The church's sewing ministry takes place in her family home, and her mother is the sewing instructor. Here, women learn the principles of sewing, working with sewing machines, making patterns and design. Through this training they acquire skills that help them generate an income for their families and help them grow in confidence as women capable of more than merely surviving the daily challenges of life in their community. It also means that they can keep their children close to them rather than having to leave them at home alone or with neighbours which women

who work in garment factories have to do. The church hopes to roll this project out in three other towns.

Pastor Ana Patricia's church is also located in the family home. Her family allowed her to use a small annexe as a church, where up to 40 children attend on a Sunday, as well as attending other weekly activities such as music classes. This little church and the activities it hosts is a vital part of these children's lives, helping to keep them safe develop in confidence and in the knowledge that God loves them dearly.



The students proudly holding their Christmas dress patterns

Church Pastors and SALT group training

The church's biggest asset is its people, and I was very challenged to meet the very dedicated pastors of this church. There are 19 pastors, including three presbyters. The others are in the process of studying and training for ordination, and the vast majority are benefiting from the group training grant that the Methodist Church in Britain has granted to enable students from Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras to meet in El Salvador and receive ministerial training from Duke Divinity College (North Carolina), in conjunction with the General Board of Global Ministries. This training has enabled them to receive firm grounding in Methodism, so it was no wonder they requested that Ken lead a workshop on the Methodist understanding of the Trinity. The workshop encouraged many interesting and difficult questions from the students after the training, which Ken coped well with!

When I asked one of the students, pastor Alfredo Lopez, what had impacted him the most about the training, in El Salvador, he said that he was touched to learn about John Wesley's experience on the boat that was sinking and his observations of the faith in God's love of the Moravians. It was obvious that Pastor Alfredo's learning experience in El Salvador has had a great impact on his walk with God and his ministry.



Pastor Ruben Gonzalez, vice-president

We were taken to the town of Jinotega, north of Managua, located in the country's coffee growing region. This is a place where there was significant violence during the Sandinista-Contra civil war, and where there were former combatants who later became Methodist pastors fought against one another. Now with the peace of Jesus in their hearts and the forgiveness of God over their lives, they found the strength to forgive one another, love one another and work alongside one another for the Kingdom. As one pastor put it, "the ones I hated the most and who were my enemies during the civil war, it is for these God has put the most love in my heart".

Primary school pupils graduating into their next school year

Pastor Rubén, the church vice-president, is a man full of passion for Jesus and for seeing his community transformed. His church is reaching out to the local community by providing primary school education, and within a year it has become one of the best in the area. The church aims to reach out to encourage and educate these children from as young as possible to help them improve their life expectations, help them avoid joining gangs or falling into drug addiction and so that they may grow in their faith through being able to better understand the Bible. It is also a way of reaching out to their parents, many of whom have little or no education.

Meeting with church leadership group

This was a wonderful opportunity to share with the leaders of the church how much we valued their partnership, and to explore with them the different expressions of this partnership, in terms of prayer, strategic cooperation and financial support. It was a good opportunity to briefly explain the broad differences between the Methodist Church in Britain and the UMC, given that the UMC is also a major partner of the MC Nicaragua and contributes its strengths to their partnership in terms of Volunteer In Mission teams (VIM teams). We explored how the MCB through WCR contributes more towards capacity building of its partner churches, which is why we run programmes such as the National in Mission Appointments programme, the SALT programme and mission partner programmes. We explored the needs of the church and identified two major needs that MCB could help the church address through different grant programmes:

- ◆ **To work towards self-sustainability.**

The church is planning on building good quality guest rooms in which the many UMC Volunteer in Mission teams can stay, instead of paying to stay in hotels. The money generated from the guest rooms will be re-invested into the church. MCB can support this through the new round of annual rolling grants which begins next Connexional year.

- ◆ **An Evangelism Coordinator**

The heart of the church in Nicaragua is in reaching out to its community with the Good News of Jesus Christ. It wants to train its members to evangelise and reach out to their local communities, and therefore needs a dedicated Evangelism trainer and coordinator in order to equip the church and encourage it in this ministry. We concluded that a National in Mission Appointment would be idea for this endeavour, so the church will submit an NMA application by next year's deadline.



To conclude, the visit with Ken and Marion Howcroft was incredibly informative in terms of learning about the bloody historical context that the church serves its community in. It was moving to see how the church was reaching out to children and youth and really showing them the love of Christ in word and deed. It was challenging and inspiring to see the church's pastors investing themselves fully into their ministries, not giving much regard for

personal space and privacy yet seeming to be so joyful and fulfilled in doing this. The welcome we received was wonderful and generous and it will be exciting to see our partnership as Methodist churches grow over the years .

Sandra Lopez, partnership coordinator