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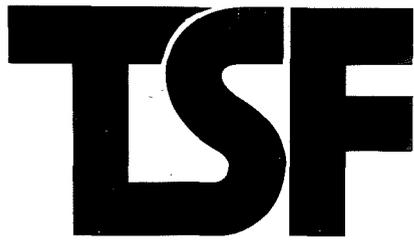
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# BULLETIN

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# Who is my Neighbor?

## Nicaraguan Evangelicals Host U.S. Evangelicals

by Ronald J. Sider

During the week of December 12–19, I was one of seven American evangelicals who visited Nicaragua to talk with top leaders in the government and the church. We were invited by Nicaragua's evangelical Christians, who are deeply disturbed by the lack of information flowing between evangelicals in the U.S. and Nicaragua. We talked with Daniel Ortega, "President" of this country (his title is Coordinator of the Junta of the Government), Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto, Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal, and other key governmental leaders as well as dozens of Christian leaders, both Catholic and Protestant.

The U.S. team included David Howard, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship, Vernon Grounds, former President of Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Linda Doll, editor of IVCF's *HIS* magazine, Tom Minnery, news editor of *Christianity Today*, Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, Joyce Hollyday, associate editor of *Sojourners*, and myself.

Today, some Americans view Nicaragua as a dangerous, totalitarian, Communist, anti-American country which is destroying the church and exporting Marxist revolution. Others see it as having begun a near-perfect revolution for justice. What is the truth about Nicaragua today?

A brief history is important. U.S. Marines occupied the country for most of 1911–33. When they left, they installed the Somoza dynasty. Until its overthrow in 1979, it was one of the more corrupt, brutal dictatorships in Latin America. The Somoza family acquired huge estates and large businesses. Opponents were tortured and crushed. Evangelical historian Richard Millett has published a careful historical study (*Guardians of the Dynasty*, 1977) showing how the U.S. installed, trained and equipped the National Guard that enforced Somoza's rule.

On July 19, 1979, a popular revolution overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. The new government included people from a number of political parties, although the dominant party was the Sandinista Front. Its announced platform was a non-aligned foreign policy, a mixed economy, political and religious freedom, and the improvement of conditions for the poor.

### Positive Effects of the Revolution

Particularly striking has been the attitude toward the supporters of the former dictatorship. Most revolutions have taken revenge, but the Sandinistas have not. Fifty thousand persons (in a country of 2.8 million) died during the revolution; the majority of the dead were killed by the National Guard's random bombing of the civilian population, indiscriminate killing and torture. The U.S. ambassador, Anthony Quainton, stated in our interview with him that very few people were killed after the revolution in spite of this history. Members of the National Guard received a three-year sentence. If they were guilty of specific instances of torture, they received longer sentences. But, said Quainton, they are treated fairly, and the penal system works as well as anywhere. And Quainton also stated that, unlike most other countries in Central America, there is virtually no government sponsored or tolerated killing today.

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Even before the revolution succeeded, the Sandinista rebels had developed a program to promote reconciliation rather than hatred because they feared that some of the people might seek revenge. So they created a popular slogan, "Relentless in struggle but generous in victory." We saw billboards in the capital of Managua that said: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him." When we visited the Foreign Minister, Miguel d'Escoto, he recounted a striking event that symbolizes this policy of reconciliation. Right after the victory, d'Escoto went to see imprisoned National Guardsmen with Thomas Borge, now Minister of the Interior. Borge had been imprisoned and tortured by Somoza. When Borge came face to face with the man who had tortured him, he said: "I have come for my revenge. For your hate, I give you love. And for your torture, I give you freedom." Borge then allowed his torturer to leave the country. As a result of this policy of reconciliation, only a few instances of unauthorized personal revenge occurred.

There have been other striking successes. A massive literacy program reduced illiteracy from about 60 percent to 12 percent in two years. Tens of thousands of teenagers helped in the literacy cam-

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### ***Nicaraguan evangelicals have a strong feeling of being neglected and ignored by their evangelical brothers and sisters in the U.S.***

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paign, living for months in primitive rural areas teaching peasants how to read. We talked with well-off evangelical youth who described the profound impact this experience had on their understanding of rural poverty. Government clinics provide free health care almost everywhere in the country. Almost all children have been vaccinated. Dr. Gustavo Parajon, the leader of Nicaraguan evangelicals, walks with a limp because he had polio as a child. Today he proudly points out that the polio index in his country is zero. The U.S. ambassador stated that the present government has constructed much more low-income housing than the previous government.

### **The Ordeal of the Miskito Indians**

The November 8, 1982 issue of *Newsweek* reported that the U.S. had launched a massive campaign to destabilize and eventually remove the present government. The CIA is funding armed attacks on Nicaragua by former members of Somoza's National Guard.

Why? The Reagan administration points to problems in Nicaragua that they claim justify their view that the country is becoming totalitarian. There are some reasons for concern. Nicaragua today is not a utopia. Miskito Indians have suffered unfair treatment. There have been some attacks on the churches. The press is partly censored and elections have been postponed until 1985.

We talked at length with Rev. Norman Bent, a Moravian pastor and leader of the Miskito Indians (most Miskitos are Moravians). Bent showed how a complicated history, racial prejudice, a series of government mistakes, isolated killing and CIA involvement have

devastated Miskito Indian society.

Historically, the Spanish population of the west coast controlled Nicaragua. Racial prejudice existed both on the part of the light-skinned Spanish on the Pacific coast and the darker Indians on the Atlantic coast. However, the central government largely ignored the sparsely-populated Miskito area, so there was relatively little friction. But when the new government decided to integrate the east coast fully into the new literacy and health programs, the Miskitos feared their traditional culture would not be respected.

The new government's traditional Spanish prejudice toward the Indians was heightened by other reasons for suspicion. The major Miskito political organization had declined the Sandinistas' invitation to support the revolution in 1978. The new government also knew that the new Indian leader, Steadman Fagoth, elected by the Miskitos after the revolution, had been supported by a top lieutenant of

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***"I have come for my revenge. For your hate, I give you love. For your torture, I give you freedom."***

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Somoza and had acted as an informer against both Sandinista supporters and fellow Miskito Indians during his university studies.

When the government learned that a few Miskito leaders were supporting the Somocistas (members of Somoza's National Guard) who were already launching raids on Nicaragua from Honduras, they overreacted and arrested all the Miskito political leaders in February, 1981. In one incident, when they tried to arrest one leader during a worship service, shots killed four Moravians and the congregation battered four soldiers to death. The young soldiers were poorly equipped to deal with another culture and were sometimes offensive. Tensions rose. Moravians engaged in a peaceful protest of fasting and prayer were pushed out of churches by the government. With every new incident, more fearful Indians waded or paddled across the Rio Coco to Honduras.

Finally, with life in the Miskito area along the Rio Coco nearly paralyzed, the government admitted that it had made mistakes and released Steadman Fagoth. He promised to return to his people, calm their fears and persuade those who had fled to Honduras to return. Instead, he gathered more Miskito leaders together, fled to Honduras, and joined the CIA-funded Somocista guerillas. Using their radio station, Fagoth urged the Miskitos in Nicaragua to join him in Honduras and fight the "totalitarian, Communist" government in Managua.

The government then forcibly evacuated at least 10,000 Miskitos along the river, taking them to new villages further inland. They burned their houses along the river and killed their cattle so they could not be used by the Somocistas in their raids into Nicaragua from Honduras. The government has provided new villages, technical assistance and health care in the new location. Physical conditions are probably better than they were in their traditional vilages, but the people still long for their familiar surroundings and resent their forced evacuation.

Bent freely acknowledges that some Miskitos have been killed and that the Nicaraguan government made serious mistakes. But he believes it was due to ignorance and inexperience, not intentional destruction of the Miskitos. Because of those mistakes, however, several thousand Miskitos are fighting with the Somocistas, and the whole affair provides the U.S. with its most spectacular propaganda piece to justify the CIA's intervention.

Bent has proposed a workable solution to end the suffering of his people. He has called for a dialogue between the Miskito Indians in Honduras and Nicaragua under the supervision of international groups like the Red Cross. But that could happen only if Honduras and the U.S. agreed. They refuse because reconciliation would take away one of the main instruments of propaganda for the U.S. and part of the anti-Sandinista armed forces. Bent's protest about this policy to top U.S. officials has been of no avail.

Racial prejudice, mistakes, overreaction and mutual suspicion, greatly compounded by CIA intrigue and U.S. weapons, are destroying important sections of a peaceful Indian society. Bent believes that

the Miskitos could solve their problems if the U.S. would stop interfering. But if the U.S. continues to manipulate them for larger geopolitical designs, large numbers of Miskito Indians will continue to suffer and die.

### **Other Reasons for Concern**

More briefly, I will comment on the attacks on churches in 1982, press censorship and the postponement of elections.

In the summer of 1982, relations between the Sandinistas and the churches became very tense. (Since the events dealing with the Catholic church are rather widely known, I will deal with the Protestants.) Most evangelical denominations had supported Somoza. They were proud when church members joined the National Guard. Nor had very many evangelicals participated in the overthrow of Somoza. After the revolution some Moravian pastors did support the Somocistas. Furthermore, the Santa Fe document (a background document influential in the preparation of the 1980 Republican platform) had outlined a strategy for using fears of Communism to motivate Christians in countries like Nicaragua to "fight Communism." The Sandinistas therefore were suspicious of evangelical denominations, most of whom had strong ties to the U.S.

In May and June of 1982, a few evangelicals anonymously waged a campaign in Managua buses declaring that the devastating spring floods were God's judgment on the atheistic Nicaragua. They urged people to leave their jobs. Some Assembly of God pastors denounced the government's vaccination program. At the same time leaflets announcing the evangelistic campaign of Morris Cerullo, a U.S. charismatic evangelist, said that Satanic activity in Nicaragua was stronger than ever. Cerullo, they said, would come to exorcise the devil. The government assumed this was counter-revolutionary activity. When Cerullo arrived (on his own private plane!) on the day the country was celebrating General Sandino's birthday, the government refused to let him enter the country.

It was in this context that the unauthorized seizure of a number of churches by local popular organizations occurred. Hostile slogans were painted on some churches. All evangelicals were attacked as "sects" in a story in the government newspaper, *Barricada*.

The Evangelical Committee for Aid Development (CEPAD), which functions as an evangelical alliance, promptly protested to the government. The government newspaper printed their rebuttal. They also met with top government officials demanding the return of the churches.

In early September, Daniel Ortega, leader of the government, met with CEPAD and made a major speech. He apologized for the mistake and repeated the government's clear commitment to religious liberty. All church properties (except those of the Jehovah's Witnesses) have been returned. Virtually all evangelical leaders we talked to said that the situation had improved dramatically and that the crisis was over.

Some restrictions on the freedom of the press provide another reason for concern. Citing the state of emergency caused by the raids from Honduras, the government imposed prior censorship on the Catholic radio station and the newspapers on March 15, 1982. Since then, all copy must be submitted to the government before publication. *La Prensa* helped overthrow Somoza and supported the revolution for the first year, but then began to oppose the government. The editor to whom we talked, Dr. Roberto Cardenal, acknowledged that most of the paper's professional staff left at that point. Working closely with the Catholic Archbishop, *La Prensa* functions as a vigorous opposition newspaper. And it regularly has articles censored.

In the San José proposals agreed to just before Somoza fell, the Sandinistas agreed to early elections. It is unclear why they did not keep that promise since almost everyone agrees that they would have won a resounding victory at that time. Instead, they have postponed elections until 1985 and are now in the process of writing the electoral laws that will govern those elections.

### **U.S. Government Charges**

In short, there are causes for concern as well as reasons for approval. Three additional charges, however, have been made to justify the Reagan administration's policy. These need to be addressed. Is Nicaragua sending large quantities of arms to El Salvador's rebels? Is

Marxist-Leninist ideology being promoted by the government? Is there religious liberty?

The U.S. ambassador told us that "something like half" of the Salvadoran rebels' arms come through Nicaragua. Nicaragua has no common border with El Salvador. But Nicaragua has offered to conduct a joint border patrol with Honduras. This would prevent the flow of arms from Nicaragua through Honduras to El Salvador, but it would also prevent the Somocista raids into Nicaragua. The U.S., our ambassador acknowledged, opposed a joint patrol.

What of Marxist-Leninism? No one denies that some members of the Sandinista Party are Marxist-Leninists although Marxism-Leninism is not official Sandinista ideology. That the present government favors socialism is clear and public, but so do the British Labor Party and the West German Social Democrats. Socialism is not the same as

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***Miskito Indians have suffered. There have been some attacks on the churches. The press is partly censored. Elections have been postponed.***

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Marxism-Leninism.

If the Sandinistas intend eventually to promote totalitarian, atheistic Marxism-Leninism, then they are proceeding in an unusual way. A number of Christians are in key government posts crucial for ideological indoctrination. A Jesuit, Fernando Cardenal, was the head of the literacy campaign (which the government saw as an instrument for ideological education). Cardenal now is the head of the Sandinista youth movement. Another priest heads up the educational program for the newly literate (one-half of the people). The Minister of Education is a devout Catholic. The Ministry of Culture (informally viewed as the "Ministry of Ideology" by the government) is directed by the poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal. Ernesto has been deeply influenced by Marx and calls himself a "Marxist Christian," but he is certainly not anti-Christian, totalitarian or atheistic.

Ignacio Hernández, Director of the Bible Societies, told us that a young man came to him in 1980 asking for books. He liked their *Jesus is The Model of The New Man*, a collection of biblical texts, so much that he took 20,000 for distribution in the army's training schools.

There are doctrinaire Marxist-Leninists in Nicaragua. But even the ambassador acknowledged there was not a lot of evidence that the Sandinistas were promoting Marxism-Leninism.

What of the charge that there is no religious freedom in Nicaragua? Virtually everyone we spoke to said this is simply not true. The Rev. Joaquin Cago, a pastor in the pentecostal Church of God, said he has travelled all over the country and found full religious freedom everywhere. There is freedom to worship, to evangelize in public places, and to distribute Christian literature freely. The U.S. ambassador flatly asserted he had no fear that religious freedom would be threatened even in the long term.

In our interview with Daniel Ortega, leader of the government, I said many American Christians were afraid, because of the history of other revolutions, that religious liberty would eventually be restricted. I asked why he thought the Nicaraguan revolution would be different from many other modern revolutions. In a lengthy reply, he said that if the Nicaraguan revolution had occurred at the time of the Cuban revolution, something similar might have happened. At that time, the church was a willing tool of the Somoza dictatorship. But a strong Catholic movement of concern for social justice subsequently emerged, and large numbers of Catholics (and some Protestants) participated over many years in the overthrow of Somoza. That long friendship and partnership, he insisted, would not end. Interestingly, the U.S. ambassador pointed to the same facts and drew the same conclusion.

We asked Ignacio Hernández what effect the revolution had had on his work. He said that before the revolution about 9,000 Bibles and 15,000 New Testaments were being distributed annually. In 1980, distribution jumped to 30,000 Bibles and 100,000 New Testaments. In

1981 it was 40,000 Bibles and 200,000 New Testaments, and in 1982, 46,000 Bibles and 136,000 New Testaments. He said they had given away about 400,000 copies of the New Testament to people who had just learned to read in the government's literacy program. And he appealed for help to fund an additional 400,000 that they want to distribute to other newly literate folk. There are instances of local harassment, but it is not official policy. Genuine religious freedom exists in Nicaragua today.

### **Nicaraguan Churches and their Government**

What is the attitude of the churches toward the present government?

Catholics are divided. Large numbers of clergy and laity are enthusiastic about the revolution. Four of the eight bishops are supportive and four are not. Archbishop Miguel Obando is decidedly hostile. He was the only prominent person who would not talk to our delegation:

Working closely with *La Prensa*, the Archbishop had used reports of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to arouse opposition to the government. After a peasant claimed to have seen the Virgin a couple of times, Archbishop Obando led a large group of pilgrims to the spot for a mass. He implied that the danger of Marxism-Leninism was so severe that the Virgin had to appear. A little later, there were reports that a statue of the Virgin was sweating—again for the same reason. *La Prensa* printed a story claiming that scientific tests had confirmed that the liquid was indeed human perspiration. But a few days later the other non-government paper discovered that the plaster of paris statue was being soaked with water, frozen each night, and then allowed to thaw out while on public display during the day.

About 14 percent (400,000) of the population is evangelical. The churches are growing about 4 percent per year. About 80 percent of the evangelicals participate in the work of CEPAD (Evangelical Committee for Aid Development), which began under the leadership of Dr. Gustavo Parajon immediately after the earthquake in 1972. CEPAD functions both as an evangelical alliance and a development agency. Its programs in 400 communities work with more people (100,000) than any agency other than the government. Dr. Parajon, a doctor trained in the U.S. and a devout evangelical, is now President of CEPAD and the most prominent leader of Nicaraguan Protestants.

CEPAD has good relationships with the government and is generally supportive, but has also challenged the government on the illegal seizure of church buildings and the treatment of Miskito Indians. On October 5, 1979, about three months after the fall of Somoza, 500 evangelical pastors connected with CEPAD endorsed a document thanking God for the fall of the Somoza dictatorship and affirming the goals of the revolution. But they insisted: "Our participation in any human project is relative to our loyalty and faithfulness toward the Lord Jesus Christ."

During our visit many people talked about the way the earthquake in 1972 and especially the revolution in 1979 have made an impact on evangelical thinking. Nicanor Mairena, a Nazarene pastor, said that he had been educated by North Americans to believe that participation in politics was wrong. (Others confirmed that this view had been widespread.) Living through the last three years has helped him, he said, to see that it is necessary both for the soul to be saved and for the body to avoid illness and illiteracy. Now he tries to be concerned for the whole person. Thelma Pereira, manager of the evangelical radio station, underlined this new concern for the whole person, saying they were now concerned "not just with the soul but with integral growth." Rodolfo Fonseca from the Church of God (Pentecostal) confessed that formerly they had had no concern for hungry people and injustice. Now they had discovered Luke 4:16 and were concerned to transform both the soul and the environment.

Nicaraguan evangelicals have a strong feeling of being neglected and ignored by their evangelical brothers and sisters in the U.S. Church delegations from the WCC and NCC, they said, had come much earlier to listen to them, but evangelicals had not. They do not in any way demand that U.S. evangelicals agree with them, but they very much want us to come and listen to their problems, concerns and viewpoints. It is critical that many more American evangelical leaders respond to this urgent plea, offering whatever corrections may be needed in the attitudes of our churches and in the policies of the U.S. government.