

As many of you know, Christ UMC has not been able to go to Nicaragua for the past 2 years because of the violence and civil unrest in the country. It is uncertain when we will be able to go back. I will try and give you a brief description of what has transpired to bring us to where we are now.

The 2018–2019 Nicaraguan protests began on April 18, 2018 when demonstrators in several cities of Nicaragua began protests against the social security reforms decreed by President Daniel Ortega that increased taxes and decreased benefits. After five days of unrest in which nearly thirty people were killed, Ortega announced the cancellation of the reforms. However, the opposition has grown to denounce Ortega and demand his resignation, becoming one of the largest protests in his government's history and the deadliest civil conflict since the end of the Nicaraguan Revolution. The civil unrest has been a longtime coming and this latest move by Ortega was sort of "the straw that broke the camel's back" There are many reasons for the unrest, but let me highlight some of the most critical ones.

The Nicaragua constitution says that one can be president for 2 terms, but not consecutive terms. Ortega was elected president in 2006 by 38% of the vote. There were several others running, but he was the only one to get at least 35% of the vote, the requirement not to have a run-off election. Nicaraguan presidential terms are for 5 years. Toward the end of his first term, he got the Supreme Court (now filled with a Sandanista majority) to change the constitution and allow him to run again. He later got the change that says he can run forever.

The people were also opposing the construction of a proposed Chinese-funded inter-oceanic canal through Nicaragua, with environmental impact, land use, and indigenous rights, as well as Nicaraguan sovereignty among the chief concerns of demonstrators. Building this canal will have a catastrophic impact on the environment. It looks like the Chinese funding has gone away, but this still looms in Nicaragua's future.

In early April 2018, demonstrators marched in Managua, the country's capital, to protest what they regarded as an insufficient government response to forest fires that burned 13,500 acres of the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve, a tropical nature preserve that is home to Rama and Kriol indigenous people, as well as significant biodiversity and endangered species. There were suspicions that the government had an interest in the fire, as it is the largest natural reserve through which the Nicaraguan Canal is planned to make.

There are many other things that have fueled the protests, but the tax increase and the benefits decrease was the breaking point. To date, over 500 people have been killed, several thousand injured, hundreds "disappeared" or gone missing, and almost 75,000 people have fled the country. This is so heart breaking for those of us who have been involved with the Nicaragua Project. We have seen so many wonderful things happen and we have seen the transformation of so many lives over the years, it is difficult to find the words to express how we are feeling.

We continue to be in contact with the school and our friends, and we are diligent in our efforts to send scholarship money every month, both to the school, as well as the college students we are putting through the University. We believe God is bigger than a dictator and that our efforts there are not in vain. We give thanks for all that God has done and is doing, and continue to believe that great things will be accomplished in Nicaragua. Please pray to that end!

Stay tuned,

Gene Cotton