

Who needs the Gospel

This August it will be twenty-five years ago that you sent us to Nicaragua as your missionaries. You sent us because people in Nicaragua needed to hear the Gospel.

But we soon discovered that we also needed to hear the Gospel anew. Our Nicaraguan friends taught us so much about celebratory worship, persistent prayer, resilient faith, and joyful sharing of the Good News of Jesus. We heard the Gospel in new, fresh and challenging ways through the lives and stories of our new friends. Our lives were forever changed.

On the other hand, we found that our new Nicaraguan friends also needed to hear the Gospel in ways that challenged some of their settled understandings. We had two early clues as to how God might be inviting us to journey together with them to a deeper understanding of the Gospel.

One clue came in a question we were asked repeatedly and for which we did not seem to have an answer that satisfied the curiosity of our new friends. People kept asking us, "What religion are you?"

No one seemed persuaded when we gave the simple response that we were followers of Jesus. People we met demanded to know if we belonged to the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, or Baptist religion. We wondered why those labels had not just become so significant, but often so bitterly divisive. Might God be inviting our friends to hear the Gospel in new and fresh ways? Might we be called to play a role in that?

A second clue came as we learned more about the deep injustices that were engrained in Nicaraguan society. We wondered how a nation in which almost everyone professed some form of the Christian faith could harbor so much violence and corruption. Again we asked whether God might be inviting our friends to hear the Gospel in new and challenging ways. And again we asked if we might be called to play a small part in that.

The Gospel Changes Everything

And so our understanding of our role as missionaries

changed. Yes, Nicaraguans needed to hear the Gospel. But we also needed to hear it in new and fresh, even disorienting, ways. Maybe being a missionary was more of a two-way than a one-way street. Maybe both we and our Nicaraguan friends saw the Gospel through the glass darkly, but could each see a little more clearly if we walked together.

This led us to an exciting seventeen-year journey to discover how broad, deep and beautiful the Gospel really might be. We came to see the Gospel as not only the entry door to the Christian journey, but journey itself.

With our Nicaragua friends we began to imagine the Gospel as a way of life that in fact changes everything - from our relationship to God to our love for neighbors different from us, even to our care for creation. We saw trust and collaboration grow between churches of different denominations. We saw Christ-followers reaching out with acts of love and words of Gospel hope to neighbors who were gang members, sex workers, and addicts.

Now Jeannie and I have been back in the United States for more than six years. We also see clues here that God might be calling the American church to a deeper understanding of the Gospel. The dividing lines in our church and nation are not the same as they were in Nicaragua. But sometimes it seems that our identity has been more shaped by our religious and political labels than by the Gospel. We also wonder about persistence, deep-rooted injustices in American society and what often seems to be our ungracious attitude to those different from us.

The deeper we get into the Gospel the more we understand that it truly changes everything. It changes everything because it gives us a new identity. The Gospel roots our identity in God's grace not in what we have achieved or what we have deserved. It leaves us with no reason to boast or think of ourselves as superior to others. The identity that Gospel gives us as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father frees us to live generously rather than building walls around ourselves. The Gospel even grants us a new family identity that supersedes our old ethnic or national identity. Our deepest identity is now our membership in the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, worldwide people of God.

Mission Network Developers

One of the joys of being in North America has been getting to accompany some of our Resonate mission network developers. Mission network developers have a different role than church planters. Church planters are doing the very important work of nurturing a new community of faith.

Mission network developers, on the other hand, are focused on the health of the body of Christ as a whole in a community. Mission network developers weave relationships that cross the barriers of race, ethnicity, social class and denomination. Mission network developers are passionate about seeing the Gospel lived out in the everyday life of their communities, in the marketplace, and in the public square. Their work is similar to the work that God had called Jeannie and I to do through the Nehemiah Center in Nicaragua. Mission network developers understand that the Gospel changes everything!

One of the mission network developers that I have been privileged to accompany is Nick In't Hout. Nick had been walking up and down the streets of Redlands, California, and praying about planting a church—but then he heard



Nick In't Hout (center) with other local ministry leaders.

the Holy Spirit tell him that Redlands didn't need another church. The city needed churches to work together. That's why Nick started connecting individuals, churches, and other ministries.

Nick and I are facilitating a community of practice with other Resonate mission network developers. The community of practice is a way for all of us to encourage and learn from each other. Click this link to see Nick's story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koF7hJqY5so&t>

PRAISE:

- For the faithfulness and generosity of God's people. We were able to make our fundraising goals this year in spite of the pandemic.
- That Joel was able to preach by video in three churches during the month of July. Two of the services were at the same time! The wonders of modern technology!
- We had intended to visit one church in Denver, two churches in Iowa, and two Michigan churches this summer. We had also hoped to visit Jeannie's family in Denver and attend my mother's 96th birthday celebration in Iowa. Because of the pandemic we were unable to make any of these trips. But we are thankful for continued good health and the ability to work from our home with zoom!
- For the growing number of mission network developers in North America.

PRAYER:

- The pandemic has changed our work so much. Joel is unable to travel to visit missionaries and local partners in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia. He is able to keep in touch with people by zoom. But there is a great deal of uncertainty as to when travel can resume. On the other hand, missionaries have also been unable to travel back to North America to visit supporting churches. Pray for wisdom for the leadership of Resonate in these uncertain times.
- Latin America in particular continues to suffer from the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. We fear what might be developing in Africa as the pandemic takes root there. Pray for God's hand of mercy. Pray that the church would be able to faithfully bear witness to the hope of the Gospel.