

Churches unite to catch the rain in rural Nicaragua!



San Jacinto is an impoverished rural community of about 2400 people in the Department of León, Western Nicaragua. The community is located in a volcanically active area that makes local water sources such as groundwater unsuitable for human consumption. Access to safe drinking water in the community is extremely limited with many households travelling several hours to the nearest source.

In 2005, Nuevas Esperanzas undertook a ten month integrated project to address the most urgent water, health and environmental needs of the community, introducing the concept of rainwater harvesting

through the construction of 14 model systems in the school, health centre and in individual houses. This project has successfully demonstrated how this technique can provide an excellent source of clean water from roofs of buildings and many in the community are desperate to see this project grow and increase access to water for many more people.



▲ Boiling mud pits associated with geothermal activity demonstrate why digging a well is not a viable option for the families who live in this area.



◀ Children often have the responsibility for collecting water on horseback which can take around 2 hours per day.

Country profile:

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has a history of exploitation, underdevelopment and civil war. It is also a country that has been repeatedly devastated by natural disasters. It is at risk from earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, landslides, and drought. Although a very religious country, Nicaraguan Christians are deeply divided along denominational lines. There is a mix of traditional and more radical expressions of Catholicism and conservative and Charismatic forms of evangelicalism. This is a country where almost everyone believes in God, which is dominated by a single faith and yet divided along sectarian lines between denominations. In this spiritual climate the Church has become weak and ineffective in addressing the many spiritual and social needs of society and many sincere believers find it hard to be part of any particular denomination. There is a great need for reconciliation and unity between the denominations, for a spirit of grace to break through the legalism and sectarianism and for a renewed passion to serve the poor.



The Catholic church, the Assemblies of God church and the Baptist church (L-R) are three of the four churches which will participate in this project. All have excellent roof structures which are perfect for harvesting rainwater.

One of those asking for help to make this happen is the pastor of the Baptist church in the community. There are four churches in the community of different denominations: Assemblies of God, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Church of God of Prophecy. The congregations range from 200 (Assemblies of God) to 45 (Church of God of Prophecy), together representing 15% of the total population of the community, well below the national average for church attendance. In responding to the request of the Baptist pastor, Nuevas Esperanzas met with the leaders of all four churches and sensed an openness to a unique opportunity for the churches to work together to create new sources of clean water by using their own church buildings! All four churches have large roofs that are ideal to catch rainwater and space to build large storage tanks that will keep water to last through the dry season.

After some exploratory planning sessions, the idea for this project which emerged is that the four churches will each construct rainwater harvesting systems to catch the rain from their own buildings. All manual labour will be provided by the four churches but rather than build their own systems they will build systems for each other. The team from the Assemblies of God church will build at the Catholic church, the team from the Catholic church at the Baptist church, and so on. In a Nicaraguan context, this idea is seriously radical!



“God must think we are crazy. We let the rain fall off our roofs onto our soil, it washes the soil away and flows to the bottom of the hill. We then climb down the hill and carry it back up to drink!”

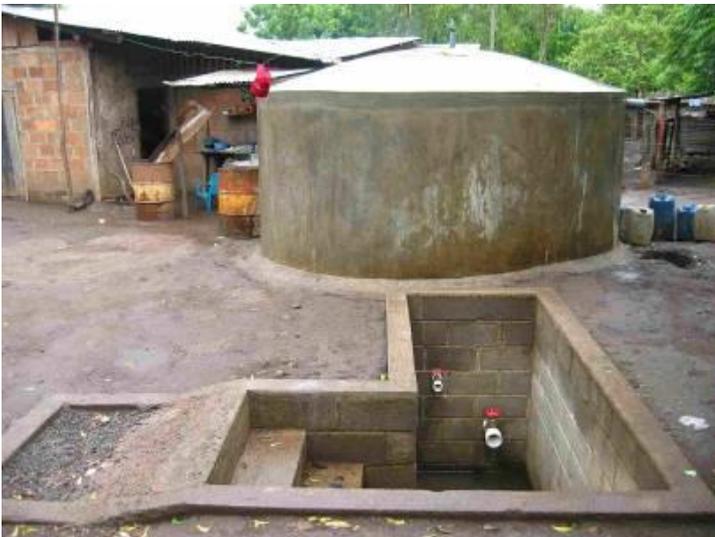
(Ugandan project worker quoted on the website of the International Rainwater Catchment Systems Association)



San Jacinto



▲ Gutters from both sides of this corrugated iron roof channel rainwater into this 31,000 litre tank. The roof of the tank protects the water supply from contamination and prevents mosquitoes from breeding.



▲ A completed 27,000 litre water tank with domed roof and tap station. The smaller valve at a higher level draws water for domestic use. The larger valve at a lower level drains the tank completely for cleaning purposes.



▲ Water at last! Luvy Vallejos, a very happy resident fills a bucket with clear water from her tank.

As well as the three months of hard labour that will demonstrate the love of Christ in a concrete way (literally!), a programme of activities will be run to increase understanding and fellowship between the churches. A series of seminars, worship events and youth activities has been planned with the support of all church leaders, a first for the community of San Jacinto. Other activities will focus on encouraging a responsible attitude to the environment amongst the churches by planting trees around the buildings to attenuate the widespread problem of deforestation in the area. Technical training sessions on the construction techniques that are critical to the success of the water project will be fully integrated with Bible studies and reflections. Just as Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's walls and rebuilt the people of God with a common purpose, it is hoped that the churches working together to build water tanks will also build their unity and faith.

How is all this possible?

Backed by the rest of the Nuevas Esperanzas team, Jorge Murillo, Coordinator of Christian Development and a Roman Catholic will work alongside his friend and colleague Yamil Fuentes, Promoter/Logistician and a Pentecostal as a clear example of how Christians from different traditions can unite to share the love of Christ through practical service. Yamil supervised much of the work on the 14 rainwater systems constructed in 2005 and Jorge has considerable experience of organising seminars and concerts including ecumenical events. Together they have shared their vision with the church leaders and a sense of real excitement has begun to grow. The pastors and priests will meet together to pray and to plan and we hope to involve many partners around the world in praying for this project and helping to support it financially. We know this will be a challenge and a spiritual battle. The pastor of the Assemblies of God church shared his excitement for the project with us but also his fear that some in his congregation will oppose his church's involvement.

We need your support!

The financial needs to make this project happen are also considerable. The church leaders will work to encourage a spirit of generous giving amongst their congregations to provide the three months of labour necessary, but rainwater harvesting systems cost a lot of money. In the long-term, the technology is good value for money as the operation and maintenance costs over the 20-30 year life of the tanks are negligible, but these systems do need a significant initial investment. The plan is to build two tanks of 71,000 litres at a cost of £2000 each for materials and two tanks of 31,000 litres at a cost of £1100 each. Perhaps your church would like to cover the cost of materials for a tank? Or perhaps our transport costs (£1100)? Or perhaps the salaries of Yamil or Jorge for the five month project (£1000 each)? In all we need to raise a little over £13,000 to turn this idea into a reality and we would love to hear from churches who would like to become part of this work of building God's kingdom here in Nicaragua.

If you or your church would like to back us, we don't just want your money! We want to send you more information and prayer updates so that you can follow our progress and PowerPoint presentations which you can use in church. So if you'd like to be involved, please contact us and we'll let you know how you can help. E-mail is the best form of communication as the postal system here is slow, but you could also fax us if you don't have access to e-mail.

One last note: our work is seasonal and the agricultural calendar is life or death to the communities we work with. We need to start this work in January 2006, so please hurry and get back to us as soon as you can get the agreement of your church committee, priest, home group or PCC!

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About us:

Nuevas Esperanzas (New Hope) was formerly Mercy Ships Nicaragua and now operates as an autonomous programme under the direction of FUNDAPADELE (Fundación para el desarrollo de León), a local charity registered with the Government of Nicaragua and accountable to its board of trustees. Our mission is to work alongside rural communities in western Nicaragua as they seek to develop sustainable livelihoods that lift them out of poverty. We work in agriculture, water, the environment, health and housing, following a model of holistic, transformational development which addresses material and spiritual needs in a culturally appropriate manner.



If you would like a copy of the full budget or further details about this project, or if you would like a copy of the final report on the rainwater harvesting project undertaken by Nuevas Esperanzas in 2005, then we would be happy to send these to you (preferably by e-mail).

◀ Something to smile about! This tank will provide water for a family of 13.