



Update from Phil and Olivia Iekel August 2021

Dear Friends,

We hope and pray you are well. As you may have heard, we have some exciting updates to share! This summer Phil and I are transitioning into new roles in Nicaragua. Phil has moved into the role of Office Director in Engineering Ministries International's (EMI) Nicaragua office, and I am concluding my time with CEPAD and will be joining the EMI Nicaragua team. We'd like to share a few details of this transition and a reflection as I wrap up and as new staff joins the CEPAD team.

Lasting transformation

I first visited CEPAD during one of their transition years in 2014, a time when CEPAD's team concludes work with a group of 40 communities, carries out evaluations and planning, and then begins ministering with 40 new communities. This time of preparation and relationship building sets an important foundation for the upcoming five years of ministry with the new communities. Last year, CEPAD walked out this transition again with their 2015-2019 cycle, as they have done many times over their decades of service to vulnerable populations across Nicaragua.

I have been struck again by this process of accompanying communities and helping families work together to break the cycle of poverty. I recall many meetings where CEPAD's leaders emphasized that development and change is a *process* and that's why CEPAD organizes its work in the way it does. This slow and steady process of presence and training leads to long-term change, not short-term results. Looking back now, I am thankful that I could participate in a complete cycle and see this process take shape—where unknown and often timid community members become our friends and emerge as bold leaders for their communities. I have been privileged to listen firsthand to their process with CEPAD...

In 2017, I stood in a field where a farmer named Fermin had applied CEPAD's natural techniques on half his field of corn and expensive, but typical, chemical treatment on the rest of his crop. His weathered, wide-brimmed hat could have almost covered the sparkle in his eye as he stood back and watched us take in the difference; a difference that was visible to the naked eye from his homegrown experiment. CEPAD's value of helping make the most of what is available—most importantly community members' ingenuity and abilities—has always stood out to me as a key reason why Fermin and hundreds of others will continue to live transformed lives long after CEPAD leaves their communities.



Last year, I watched a young woman named Miriam perform a beautiful traditional dance during her community's CEPAD graduation ceremony. She later received a certificate for her participation in the Women's

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Artesian Crafts program. You could say Miriam “came of age” while CEPAD was in her community, still in primary school when we started and not far off from finishing high school at the community graduation that day. Miriam had organized a group of women in her region and traveled to the capital city where she applied for funding to start a small business making piñatas and other crafts she had learned with CEPAD. They had made inroads into the market in Managua and were eager to sell their products.



Even more recently, I sat with Pastor Freddy, CEPAD’s director of Programs and Projects. We just call him “Pastor,” but he is actually a pastor, psychologist, accountant, and joyful tambourine player for CEPAD’s daily devotions. Before joining staff, Freddy served as a member of CEPAD’s board and later the board president. Coming from a conservative denomination, Freddy described his journey of letting go of closed-minded and legalistic notions of what the gospel meant and embracing a new understanding he learned from CEPAD about service and love for our neighbors. Pastor Freddy oversees all of CEPAD’s programs and emergency projects but personally spearheads their efforts to help under-resourced pastors grow in these same areas and to support rural teenagers to face issues of abuse, addiction, and trauma in their communities. His prayer and vision are for the gospel to firmly anchor everything that CEPAD does and for the local church to be the hub from where communities grow.



Looking forward

This transition for us does not mean Global Mission’s partnership with CEPAD is coming to a close. On the contrary, there is still much work to be done together! I am excited to share that Nicole Opgenorth, a former RCA volunteer we hosted in Nicaragua, has been approved as a long-term RCA missionary to Nicaragua. Nicole will serve as CEPAD’s communications coordinator and the new liaison for RCA churches. She is currently raising support and will join CEPAD’s International Relations team as soon as possible. A Nicaraguan named Boris has also been hired to the team as the new volunteer and intern program coordinator. Earlier this summer I got to spend time training Boris, and we are so thankful to see how this program will continue under local leadership! CEPAD is already at work in the new 40 communities for their 2021-2025 cycle. As I reflect on the past 5-year process and this new one takes shape, I wonder what God has in store for how we as RCA Global Mission can walk with CEPAD in accompanying these communities toward lasting change. Though Phil and I will not have a formal role in this work, we pray this partnership will continue to grow and are excited to support it in moving forward under the leadership of Nicole and the CEPAD team.

Thankfulness

As this chapter comes to a close and a new one begins, most of all, we want to say thank you. Thank you for praying with us, for sharing in many highs and lows, and for your partnership as we participate together in God’s work around the world.

Going forward, we will continue to share with you about our ministry with EMI Nicaragua through these Dear Friends letters. Please drop us a note if you would like to know more about our plans with EMI or be added to our more frequent prayer updates.

RCA Global Mission does not receive denominational assessments or covenant shares. We depend on the faithful generosity of churches and individuals.

If you would like to stay in the loop about RCA Global Mission's ongoing ministry with CEPAD, we highly encourage you to sign up for Nicole's Dear Friends letter! She will be sharing about her experience with CEPAD, the progress in the new communities, the volunteer & intern program, and new opportunities for involvement. The sign-up form is available at www.rca.org/opgenorth.

"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Revelation 1:5b-6

Gratefully,
Phil and Olivia Iekel