



RCA Global Mission

CEPAD

Stories From Nicaragua



Dear Friends,

It is always an honor to share stories from the Nicaraguan *campo* (countryside) with you, and to have you join my partnership with CEPAD (the Council of Protestant Churches in Nicaragua).

I admire CEPAD's mission in providing wholistic and sustainable community development in rural Nicaragua. My role within CEPAD is as the Communications Coordinator and RCA Liaison. I have enjoyed connecting with and hosting supporting churches. I am so thankful for each and every one of you who are serving your brothers and sisters in Nicaragua.

I hope that the stories shared here will inspire you and give you a glimpse as to how the Lord is working. I pray that you would consider starting or continuing partnering with CEPAD, as we are in need of additional support for the Pantasma region. Please reach out if you have any questions about CEPAD, the RCA Global Mission partnership, or visiting opportunities.

Many blessings,



Nicole Opgenorth
RCA Missionary, Nicaragua
nopgenorth@rca.org



Brothers and Sisters,

What a blessing to write to you and share our thanks for all of the support you give. You are helping rural communities provide food and a future for their families. The Lord will multiply all of your gifts and support to help us continue with CEPAD's ministry.

The rural communities also share their greetings and thanks—for your visits and support. The people's wealth is in all the new knowledge they are learning and putting into practice within their communities, farmlands, and homes.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

"I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."
- Philippians 4:13



Left to Right: Favio (Regional Manager), Nicole, and Blanca (Social Technician)

Our Programs

Where We Work

CEPAD's Mission:

Provide faith-based training to people in rural Nicaraguan villages through programs in leadership development, sustainable agriculture, women's economic development, and pastoral training so they can break the cycle of hunger and poverty to support themselves and their families.



Leadership Development

Local leaders are trained to develop new resources and work with the local government to achieve their goals. They work to identify needs and create strategies to meet them. They also serve as main points of contact for CEPAD.



Sustainable Agriculture

CEPAD works with small farmers to increase food production, improve economies, and protect natural resources by using organic farming techniques. In just a few years, farmers go from growing only staple crops like beans and corn to producing up to 25 varieties of fruits, vegetables, and forest trees.



Pastoral Training

Pastors and church leaders can attend practical workshops and receive self-study programs in theology to lead their congregations. CEPAD does not plant churches but chooses to work with already established congregations regardless of denomination or affiliation.



Women's Entrepreneurship

Women learn how to analyze business opportunities, good investing practices, and keeping accounting records before receiving a seed fund to help them start their own business. They repay their loan to a community bank, so they can have a revolving fund to involve more women in the future.

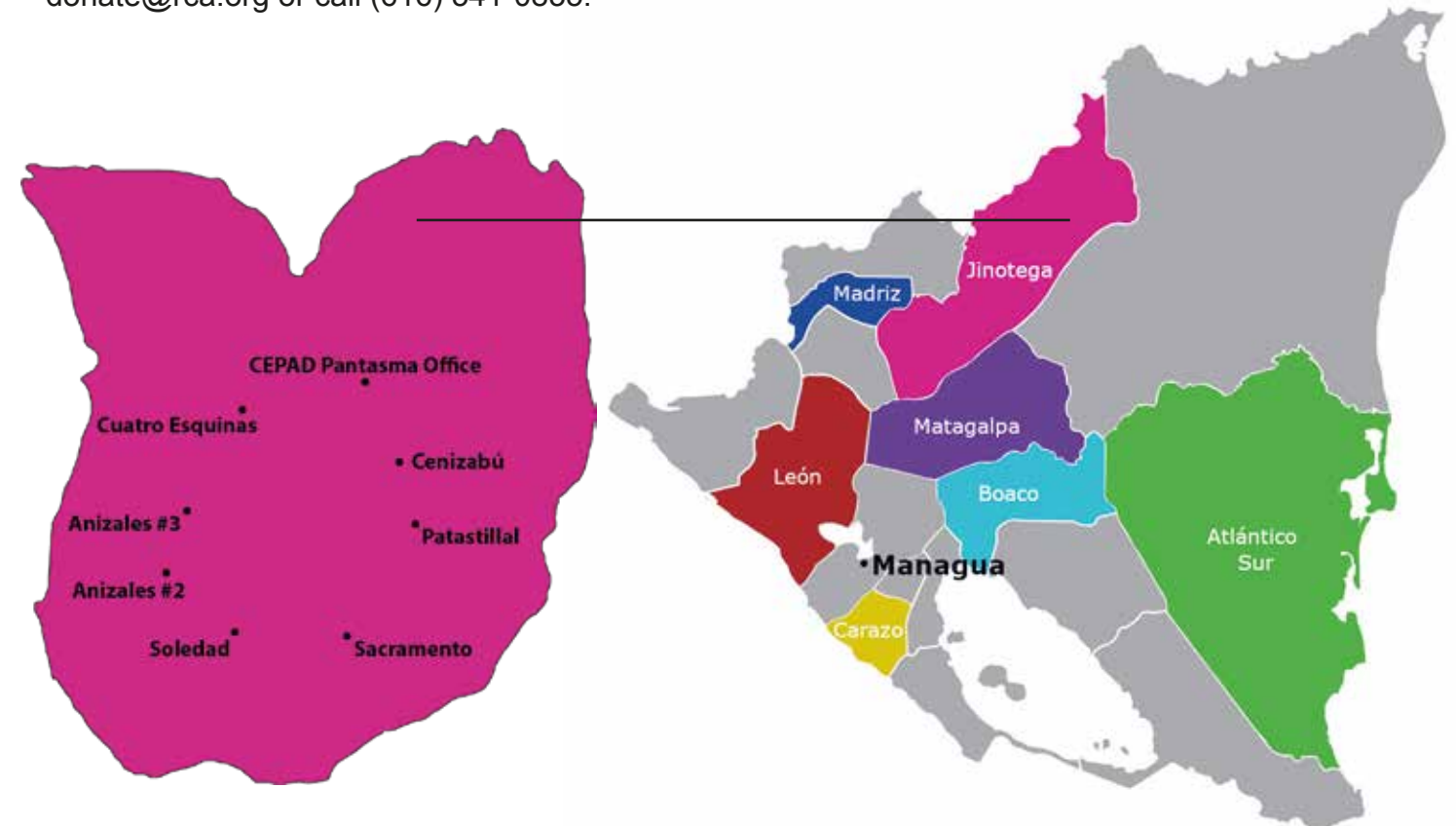
CEPAD works in 7 departments (states) of the country for a total of 47 communities.

Below, you can see where we are working for 2021-2025. RCA Global Mission is committed to supporting the Pantasma region in Jinotega. This means supporting the office staff and covering the costs for all four programs.

In total, your gifts through RCA Global Mission are supporting:

- 7 Communities
- 42 Community Leaders
- 35 Women Entrepreneurs
- 35 Family Gardens
- 80 Farmers and Disciples
- 21 Youth Leaders
- 7 Pastors

RCA Global Mission is still in need of funding to support CEPAD's Pantasma office. To partner with us, please visit rca.org/give/council-of-protestant-churches-of-nicaragua-cepad or you can email donate@rca.org or call (616) 541-0835.





You Gave Antonia Tools to Help Vulnerable Youth

Due to more isolated locations, lack of education and opportunity, and broken family systems, children and youth are more vulnerable to addiction and violence in rural Nicaragua. CEPAD's Youth Leadership Program, which falls under pastoral training, aims to empower young adult leaders to help this vulnerable population. Antonia is a single mother at just 22 years old, but still searches to serve her community.

In the Youth Leadership Program, Antonia and others have attended workshops on domestic violence, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, depression, anxiety, and trauma response. Learning basic counseling and intervention tools has helped Antonia provide much-needed mental health support, which is unavailable in her community.

"I helped a girl who was 14. She was having some family problems and fell into depression. In some very difficult moments, she decided to start cutting herself. The first invitation I extended to her was to bring her to church. She went, and since then, I've been helping her by talking with her. She has now stopped cutting herself. Her mom doesn't allow her to go to church anymore, but I text her on my phone to keep in contact and not abandon her."

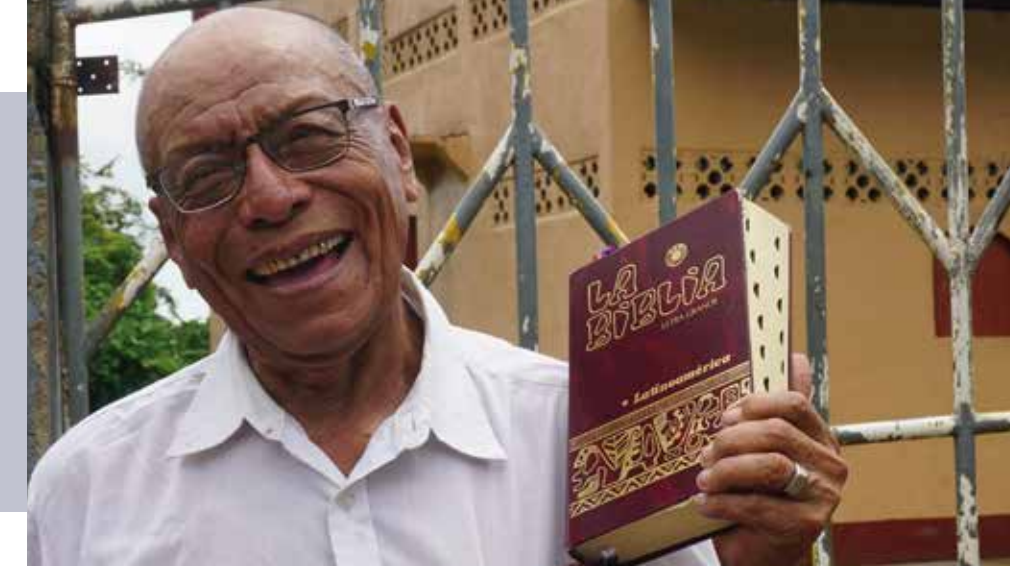
Not only is Antonia helping vulnerable youth, she is also following God's call to attend seminary.

"I've felt this call on my heart to learn more about the Bible. I know it will help me and will bless me a lot in my spiritual life. I'm in my first year studying theology. I want to get my teaching license afterwards to be able to teach theology, or maybe God will call me to be a pastor, which is fine, too."

Lord-willing, Antonia will continue her studies and serve as a role model for other youth in her community. She is passionate about Christ and can be a positive change in leading the next generation.

Left: Antonia and other youth leaders use soccer and other activities to engage youth.

Pastor Juan



Even at 81, Juan continues to serve his community in the Catholic Church. He serves as the chaplain since they don't have a priest. He did not know Christ for most of his life and feels as though he is making up for lost time.

In CEPAD's Pastoral Training Program, Juan attends workshops on deaconry, the Reformation, Biblical context, and specific Bible stories, among other themes. Juan also gets to meet other church leaders from his community and other communities, both Catholic and Protestant. This is especially meaningful as there is often a disconnect between the two with very little communication or collaboration. CEPAD's goal is to work with the existing churches to help them shift from inward-focused (only looking at and prioritizing those within the church's four walls) to outward-focused (serving the whole community, regardless of ideology).

Juan shares one of his favorite messages that he's learned from the workshops.

"I'm able to share what I've learned with the congregation. We know from the story of the Good Samaritan that he was the only one who took compassion on the man in the road and helped him, even though they were not of the same religion. Some of us here say, 'I'm Catholic', but there is no service in that. If they see someone on the side of the road, they don't go and help them. That's messed up and broken. We need to change that."

While Juan only came to Christ 14 years ago, he passionately shares about the Bible, and how he has experienced the Lord.

"What I love most about the Bible is the message that I should keep telling others of what I've learned, what God has given me, what He has done for me. Why? Many times today, we don't believe there are miracles. But I've experienced a miracle, and I'll share it with you. I had tetanus and spent thirty days in the hospital without being able to eat. So I told God, 'If it's my time, take me. But if you're going to heal me, please give the doctors the necessary knowledge so I can get better.' And I got better. That's why I'm even more involved with Christ, because He gave me a miracle."

We are so thankful for Juan's service to his church and community. We trust that the Lord will continue to work through him as the church works to be more outward-focused.

Sowing Turned to Sewing

Left: Angel (middle) and Yessica (right) with their young daughter Ashlyn (left).

Right: Yessica sewing at her machine.



As part of the CDC, Angel helps identify community needs and looks for local solutions, often times advocating to the local government for aid.

“The two projects we have going on right now are the school and latrines. The school building right now isn’t in good condition. There are only two classrooms, and they’re in a bad state. And the latrines are important for hygiene. There are a lot of people who don’t have one; others have one but in bad shape. I think it’s an urgent priority, because if we don’t have latrines, our water sources can suddenly become contaminated.”

Angel shares that the “motivation and support from the community” is his favorite part of being in CEPAD’s program.

“We feel very thankful for the support from CEPAD’s donors. We want to thank them for everything they do so that the programs can come to us. We’ve received so much from CEPAD. I think that only the Lord can repay you, we can only say thank you. May the Lord greatly bless you. through the blessings that you plant in us, we are able to harvest them.”

Angel is leading his community, and he serves as a great role model to create change for future generations. Angel’s support of his wife is also counter cultural to much of rural Nicaragua.

Many other women who join Yessica in CEPAD’s

Women’s Entrepreneurship Program have experienced abuse or abandonment, having to fight just to attend workshops. However, when Yessica got her first loan from CEPAD and didn’t have enough to purchase a sewing machine, Angel agreed to step in.

He plants basic grains, and they decided to dedicate a portion of their cornfield to their sewing machine fund. All the profit that they made from that section of corn went towards purchasing a machine.



This summer, I hosted a group from Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa. This was a special group to me since I grew up in this church and my dad was the pastor there for almost 18 years. I knew most of the group from when I was growing up and had played large roles in my faith journey. I even learned that one of them helped potty-train me as a child (how embarrassing!) and one brought a picture of me in a Dutch costume at the local Tulip Festival from almost 20 years ago.

It was such a blessing to host them, not only to CEPAD staff and the rural community we visited, but to me personally. They showed up with listening ears, open hearts, and encouraging words. It was an honor to share my life in Nicaragua and the work that CEPAD does. Getting to share some of my favorite people with some of my favorite people was the biggest gift and a true glimpse of heaven.

Two of my favorite people we visited in the Pantasma region were Angel and Yessica, a young married couple who are so incredibly passionate about the Lord and serving their community.

Yessica got involved in CEPAD’s Women’s Entrepreneurship Program, where she used a loan to start her sewing business. As Angel watched his wife grow, he became impressed with CEPAD’s program, and was extremely supportive of Yessica. Recently, Angel was invited by the community to join the Community Development Committee (CDC) through CEPAD’s Leadership Development Program, and was voted to be president.

Both Yessica and Angel’s lives have been positively impacted by their training through CEPAD’s programs, which is overflowing into their village.

Once they had enough, Yessica traveled two hours by bus to purchase the machine before bringing it up the mountain on the back of a motorcycle. It was then that Yessica started to really practice and develop her skills.

She doesn't use patterns or pre-cut fabrics, but rather looks at fashion online and what others wear, and her mind figures out how to put it together. Yessica sews blouses, dresses, and skirts for both women and children. She started out selling pre-made items, but has now switched to clients choosing their own fabric and telling her what they'd like.

"During the coffee harvest season, when there's more money movement, I can earn between C3,000 - C4,000 (\$85 - \$110). But there are slower months where I don't earn as much."

Beyond learning about accounting, money management, and good investing, Yessica has also learned her value as a woman.

"We learn that we can do it. If we put our minds to it, we can accomplish it, and that women also have rights."

Since I first met Yessica, she is already completing some of the dreams she first shared with me. She now works with her sister-in-law, sharing one machine. She has started making blazers and more intricate designs. She and her sister dream of purchasing another machine and learning how to make men's clothing. In the long-term, they would like to have their own sewing workshop in the community with several machines where they can employ other women.

For Yessica, her passion for the Lord and sewing go hand-in-hand.

"I love sewing a lot. For me, it's a big blessing. Each time I try hard and accomplish something, I feel happy and especially thankful to God."

While visiting Yessica and Angel's community with Trinity Reformed Church, Yessica shared all about her sewing business while Angel beamed with pride watching his wife. Two other women and I stayed in Yessica and Angel's home, and we marveled at their family. Each morning before the sun rose, they were both up and working—Yessica preparing breakfast and Angel sweeping the home or helping with the kitchen fire—all while singing worship songs. Their daughter, Ashlyn, eventually joined them in the kitchen and would do her best to sing along.

Friends, staying in their home reminded me of Psalm 27:13, *"I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."* Though our minds and souls can be shaken by war, poverty, and disappointments, it gives me great hope to see Yessica and Angel, faithful servants living in sometimes unfathomable conditions, loving the Lord and loving His people. I hope their story inspires you, knowing that indeed the Lord is at work in Nicaragua.

I echo Angel in saying that the only thing I can do is say thank you. Thank you for supporting me in my partnership with CEPAD. Thank you for creating generational change through CEPAD's programs. Thank you for praying with me and for me, as well as for Fabio and Blanca, Angel and Yessica, Juan, Antonia, and others like them. I think that Yessica also sums it up well.

"I want to thank you with my whole heart. CEPAD's program has blessed my life and many others' lives. I believe in a God that blesses the good we do with our hearts, so I will give the rest of my life to the Lord. It is a big blessing for us."



Angel and Yessica with some of the clothing and accessories that Yessica has made.



Farming for a Future

Juan's smile lights up a room. As he talks about his small farm, he only grows more animated and passionate. He proudly shows off his water capturing system and how he grafts trees to produce more than one fruit. He openly shares about the change he has seen.

"The change in our community is notable, because we're more educated now. For example, we don't burn our land anymore. The kitchen scraps don't get thrown in the trash, but we use them in our compost. We're taking care of the earth."

Nicaragua is experiencing the severe effects of climate change. The rainy season is not as reliable, leaving many rural farmers vulnerable. That's why creating sustainable farms is so important—not just to provide food to these families, but also to protect the environment.

Much of rural Nicaragua barely survives off of a few staple crops: corn, beans, and coffee. CEPAD introduces organic farming techniques and 25 varieties of fruits and vegetables through our Sustainable Agriculture Program. Oranges, lemons, mango, avocado, pineapple, watermelon, cucumber, squash, peppers, onions, and more are thriving on Juan's land. He has also found a sense of meaning through his farm work.

"I've loved being in the program. I don't just write down what I've learned, but I use it. I feel more capable. If someone asks me for help, I can share what I've learned."

Juan generously shares his new knowledge with neighbors and disciples, giving away seeds so others can benefit and grow their own produce. He has found a stronger sense of community.

"What we do, we do together."

Juan, along with his community, are working hard to have sustainable farms, ensuring food security for their families and leaving fertile land for future generations.



Right: Juan showing how he grafts saplings together.

Volunteer and Intern Opportunities

Along with supporting the CEPAD Pantasma office, your gifts through RCA Global Mission also support a staff position at our central office in Managua. Cairo Cortez (top) is the volunteer and intern coordinator, focused on organizing opportunities for both foreign and local volunteers and interns. He is enthusiastic, hardworking, and a great team member.



Tiana (middle) spent some of her summer volunteering with CEPAD. She stayed with a host family in a rural community and helped with various activities and workshops. Tiana shares about her experience.



"I really enjoyed my time in Nicaragua. I thought the activities were really well prepared. I highly recommend staying with a host family. I loved working in the gardens and getting to see women's businesses around the community. My time there was incredible."

We also provide opportunities for Nicaraguans to complete their required internship hours. Helin (bottom) is interning with CEPAD as she studies business administration. She is helping with the accounting reports for the Pantasma office. Helin also lives in one of the communities CEPAD is working with!



"Completing my internship with CEPAD provides the opportunity to develop skills which will serve me in both my personal and professional growth."

If you or someone you know is interested in volunteering or interning with CEPAD, please contact myself (nopgenorth@rca.org) and Cairo (voluntarios.cepad@gmail.com).





Visit Nicaragua

I have loved getting to host churches connected to RCA Global Mission! It is a blessing to me as well as CEPAD's local staff and rural communities. We would love to host you!

At CEPAD, we believe in a "different" kind of mission trip. We believe that while these Nicaraguans are often poor in resources, they are not poor in creativity, innovation, or perseverance. With a little help from CEPAD's programs that provide workshops and some starting tools or resources, these communities thrive on their own.

Our mission trips aren't focused on what we can do or build for the Nicaraguans, but rather serve as an invitation to come and see what God is doing here, how communities are lifting themselves out of poverty and creating generational change, and to build relationships. After a church's first visit, if they feel led to support the community in a specific project, we will help facilitate that, but we value building relationships first. We desire collaboration to generate community, instead of economic resources creating paternalism. If this is the kind of trip that you or your church may be interested in, please reach out to me at nopgenorth@rca.org.

Partner With Us

Thank you for your continued interest in CEPAD! We want to invite you to partner with RCA Global Mission in supporting the seven communities and CEPAD staff in the Pantasma region. We are still in need of funding to provide programs for the rest of the year. To give, please visit rca.org/give/opgenorth or you can email donate@rca.org or call (616) 541-0835.