

BELIEVERS

NEWS *Flash!*

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Last month, the strongest hurricane ever recorded in the Western hemisphere battered the Central American countries of Nicaragua and Honduras - countries that are home to an estimated 4,000 brothers and sisters of our household of faith. This was happening just as the November issue of Believers News was going to press, and in a letter on page eight of that publication we informed you of our intention to supply recovery assistance to the believers in those countries, as we became aware of specific needs.

We realized that in order to be of real help, the first step must be to meet personally with the people in need. That is the only way for us to be sure that we are providing for real needs, and not what we (or others) might think are needs. To that end, my son, William, and I left on November 17 for Tegucigalpa. With us we carried items that we knew would be in short supply where we were going - water purification tablets, plus 18 portable water filters capable of filtering out cholera and other bacteria.

We spent a week in Honduras and Nicaragua, and were able to visit a good number of the pastors in each country. Briefly, we would like to share with you what we saw, what was accomplished, and what we need to do next.

William's report: Before leaving home, we already knew that land-travel in Central America would be slow and tedious, and we simply would not have the time to visit every church. So we called ahead to let as many brothers as possible know that we were coming, and meetings with local pastors were arranged in several central locations. The capital of Honduras, Tegucigalpa, was to be our 'base of operation,' where we could stay with Brother Elias Barjum, a long-time friend of Dad's and one of the two pastors in the city.

Flying in, we saw signs of destruction everywhere. Honduras received three year's worth of rain in one week, and at one point there was over 25 inches of rain that fell in a six-hour period. Landslides marked the countryside, even heavily forested areas had simply 'let go,' leaving a strip of mud as much as 20 yards wide and 300 yards long scratched into the side of a mountain. It wasn't your typical hurricane damage like we've seen in the US, caused by high winds and pounding surf. This was almost exclusively river flooding and landslides, in that order.

As the flood waters had risen, many had sought higher ground. Then, that ground turned to mud and buried thousands of people. By the time we arrived, more than 7,000 bodies had already been recovered, and 12,000 more people were still missing.

The large river that runs through the middle of Tegucigalpa crested 45 feet above normal levels, destroying bridges and houses, burying parks and streets, and leaving the entire area looking like a city dump. Standing in the middle of it all, it was hard to gain a perspective. It was all random items - the back end of a car sticking up out of the mud, an air conditioner, a mattress, and piles of trash everywhere. Only when looking from afar could you see where the landslides had swept homes into the river, or where the banks of the river had crumbled.

The Honduran people are receiving record amounts of international help. The Mexican government has brought in front-end loaders and troop trucks to help dig out houses and relocate people where necessary. The Japanese have erected field hospitals where people can receive free medical care; they are also spraying disinfectant through the streets and into the damaged houses. We checked to make sure that the believers were taking advantage of all the aid that was being made available through these government agencies.

As we met with the pastors from the different parts of the country, one of the first things that we would ask was, "Was anyone from your church killed, or is anyone missing?" And in every instance the answer was the same: **No lives had been lost, and no one was missing.** We listened as they told us of how they had miraculously been spared, sometimes clinging to their rooftops, as cars with people in them, little children on mattresses, and others clinging to pieces of wood or debris all washed by them. One sister was in her home on the riverbank when a city bus, carried by the flood, destroyed the first three houses on her block. Hers was the fifth house, and was untouched. Another sister, with her child in her arms, became caught up in the current, but before she was swept away, others were able to throw a rope around her and pull her to safety.

In and around the capital city, the believers that we were able to meet with have suffered mostly property damage. In most instances, they have already started re-building and the international relief organizations have promised to provide them with some assistance. We shall see. But traveling south on what is left of the Pan-American highway is another story.

Over 60% of the infrastructure - roads, bridges, water systems, sewage systems - of Honduras has been destroyed. Even the Pan-American (the only supply route going south) has been completely washed out in places. In its present condition, such a road would never be open in the US, but here they have no choice. Goods have to get through, and there is no other road. Earth moving equipment has created 'lanes' through the piled debris, and a steady stream of slow-moving vehicles moves southward.

In Choluteca, the land is flatter so we did not see as many landslides, but the river had overflowed its banks by hundreds of yards both directions. We were impressed to see that the believers had begun digging a freshwater well, by hand, on the church property. A perfect circle in the earth, four feet across and, so far, eight meters (24 feet) deep. They will need to dig another six meters to reach fresh water. A very impressive project.

Crossing the border into Nicaragua, you can tell immediately that this is a far poorer nation. Here traffic on the Pan-American highway is stopped cold by a series of four washed-out bridges. These are large bridges, and will require years to re-build. Traveling this stretch was an

adventure - canoes and fishing boats have been pressed into service as ferries. One of the rivers was broad and shallow, and we crossed by ox-cart.

Reports state that Nicaragua received only a glancing 'blow' from Hurricane Mitch, but believe me, it hit them where it hurts the most: the northern farming areas. Most of the believers in that area are farmers, and when the rains came, they were nearly ready to begin harvesting. Now, you cannot tell that a planted field ever existed in some areas!

One massive landslide that occurred (and which was the focus of much media attention) came from the slopes of a large, inactive volcano with a lake at its summit. Many believers lived and farmed on its slopes. When the ground became so saturated that the waters of the lake could no longer be contained, the crater broke in two places, sending water and mud down its sides. At a point nearly a mile from the summit, the two torrents joined forces to send a sea of destruction across the countryside. The majority of the people killed in Nicaragua were victims of this mudflow.

But once again we were able to see the hand of the Lord. The major part of the mud had flowed on either side of the area where the believers lived, creating an 'island' of safety for them in between. The pastor, Brother Andres Eliodoro Mendoza, lost his home, but he and his wife and five children were all spared. Here is his story:

"The water came quickly, and we had to flee our home in the dark of night, with the water up to our chests. We found refuge in another house where we spent 3 days without sleeping, constantly with the water up to our knees. We thought we would lose the children, because of the severe leg cramps from so much cold. On the fourth day we were able to go home, and found it mostly destroyed, because the mud was 3 feet deep inside. Our well was destroyed; trees had disappeared. We have no place to live right now because all this area has been declared uninhabitable by the government. All the water is contaminated, and seven-year-old, Joshua, is beginning to show skin lesions, and cannot sleep.

We have been eight years building our church and now have 12 families. No other homes were destroyed, but the church was also damaged in the flood."

In other areas, both the houses and crops of many believers have been destroyed, and much of the land is now covered by a fine lava silt. The government must determine which areas can be re-planted, but meanwhile the families are in desperate straits. There are no other jobs, and in some places they will not be able to plant new crops for months. Some are now living five families to one building. Twenty people are living in the church at San Pedro Sula. We saw some evidence that water-borne illnesses are beginning to spread, but the water filters we distributed should help to solve those problems. Many more filters are needed.

Food is available locally, and large amounts are being shipped in from nearby countries, but few can afford it. We found that a family can eat their typical diet for \$40 to \$50 per month, but many will need assistance for six months or more with food costs. We must act quickly in this area.

The Lord has protected His people from physical harm. At the same time, He has given us this opportunity to be of service. Let us be about the Father's business.

George's report: The road to recovery in Honduras, and especially in Nicaragua, will, undoubtedly, be lengthy. The primary problem at this moment continues to be food and

pure water. It is yet to be determined whether or not the gravel and silt left by the river and mud slides can be removed (in some places it is several meters deep), and as a result, there is a shortage of tillable land. It may be weeks before crops can be planted, and then several more months till harvest. Here is what has been done, thus far, to alleviate these needs, and what we believe must be done in the months ahead:

1) Each pastor we met with was given a sum of money with which he will purchase food for the families of his church, and other churches in his area that we were unable to reach. Between the funds that we distributed, and the funds that we know were distributed by others from the US with whom we are in contact, we feel that the believers of Honduras and Nicaragua will have sufficient food available to them through the end of January. At that time, it will be necessary for me to return to Central America to make certain the distribution of food is going smoothly, and to distribute the money with which they will be able to purchase food for the next 60-or-so days (on an as-needed basis, as I will explain later*).

2) A large supply of water purification tablets, plus several additional water filters are needed immediately. The filters range in price from \$60 to \$250, depending on the number of gallons it is capable of handling (some up to 13,000!). These are distributed according to the size of the group that will be using it, and they will need to be used for several more months in most areas.

3) Seed for planting. We are in the process of determining whether or not we will need to send seed from the US, or whether sufficient can be purchased there. Most of the farmers used a non-hybrid seed which they saved from crop to crop, but now that seed has been destroyed and most of them are financially unable to purchase new seed. The government has promised seed, but it may not be in time, or in sufficient quantities.

4) It is unknown at this point exactly how many homes were destroyed and how many believers will need our help in re-building. In some areas they are able to help one another with the construction. In other areas, they will need our help. I will investigate each individual situation more fully during my next trip. Also, the need for clothing and household items can be better determined at that time.

Looking to the months ahead, we are estimating that we will need to feed and offer other forms of support to approximately 50 churches (roughly 2,500 people) in Central America for a period of six to nine months. Each church represents (on average) 12 to 15 families. It costs \$45 per month to feed a family of five. That is a total of nearly \$30,000 a month for the first few months, then as crops mature and families once again become self-sufficient, the amount of support will be adjusted.* It will take a total of \$170,000 to \$200,000 over the next nine months to meet this need. It sounds like a staggering amount, but when we consider the number of people and the length of time involved, it is a modest, even meager, amount for each family. Yet, what a difference it will make in their ability to survive this disaster. Surely if we work together, we can help them to build a road to recovery.

As a token of our appreciation for your prayers and support throughout this past year, we are enclosing our new 1999 Personal Planner. We trust that it will bring enrichment and inspiration to your life each and every day.