



# TRANSFORMATION MATTERS

## News from the Nehemiah Center

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THE NEHEMIAH CENTER is a community of service and learning which trains lay and pastoral leaders in an integral biblical worldview & encourages local, national, and international collaboration for the Christ-centered, transformational development of communities and nations.

### INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATORS

Caribbean Ministries

Christian Reformed World Missions

Christian Reformed World Relief Committee

Food for the Hungry

LifeWind

Missionary Ventures

Partners in Christ

Partners Worldwide

Worldwide Christian Schools

### Service and Learning Institute Provides New Opportunities for College Students

Students interested in studying in Nicaragua have two new opportunities, thanks to new partnerships between the Nehemiah Center and Trinity Christian College (Illinois) and Dordt College (Iowa).

Trinity's semester program kicked off this spring with three students who lived with host families in Managua while taking courses in Nicaraguan history and culture, biblical worldview and development, and video production. Students were able to take advantage of the Nehemiah Center's newly equipped media studio, which includes video, audio, and lighting equipment, as well as two editing suites. Prof. Jeff DeKock, an adjunct Trinity faculty, taught the students' video production course, as well as an introductory class to a group of Nicaraguan participants who will collaborate with the Nehemiah Center on future video projects.

"One day I was interviewing a farmer," Trinity student Emily Ward said, "and he



Three students participated in the Nehemiah Center's first semester program.

told me that every day you can learn something new. That has been this semester for me. Whether I'm in class, out filming, or just getting to know people, every day has brought me new experiences and new things to think about."

Another opportunity to study in Nicaragua is available through Dordt's Fall 2008 Nicaraguan Studies Program, which is open to interested students from any college. For more information or to apply, please visit the Off-Campus Programs page at [www.dordt.edu](http://www.dordt.edu) or email Corinne Hentges ([CorinneH@dordt.edu](mailto:CorinneH@dordt.edu)).



USAID funds will supplement the Nehemiah Center's work with Christian schools.

### New funds will support, improve Christian schools

Building on the early support of Missionary Ventures and Worldwide Christian Schools, the Nehemiah Center recently received a \$384,500 grant from the USAID Excellence Project, which will be used to expand our current School Improvement Program. With funds from this 20-month grant, 15 additional trainers and support staff have been hired to work with Program Director Darling Hueck Aragón to train teachers in 123 participating schools in effective teaching methods, while also promoting parent involvement, and developing student councils. The USAID Excellence Project's goal is to expand a model of dynamic teaching, participatory learning and the application of knowledge acquired, to improve primary grade completion rates and academic performance.

## "I'm Going to Take Care of the People"

Had it not been for the war during the 1980s here in Nicaragua, Denis Cienfuegos might never have become a pastor.

"I did not want to kill anyone," Denis recalls, "so I refused to handle a weapon and did other tasks in the army. But one day I was ordered to take a gun to one of the commanding officers, and I couldn't do it."

Rather than betray his convictions, Denis fled the army and sought refuge in the church of a relative, where he quickly became very involved. "I told God when I left the military that I would follow Him, and that I would take his call on my life seriously, though I hadn't before," he said.

After attending a biblical institute in 1990, he was sent to pastor his first church in El Rama for three years, and later transferred to another in Managua, where he met and married his wife Blanca.

Together they have spent the last 8 years serving as pastors for the Belen Church in Subtiava, a historically indigenous neighborhood in Leon. "When we arrived, the membership list said there were 51 members, but there were really only 25. For the first four years, we didn't grow at all. But when we began working with the Nehemiah Center things began to change."

Today, the Belen Church has 115 members, thriving youth and music ministries, and a growing impact on the surrounding community.

"Three years ago, what we did was plan activities. But we didn't know why we were doing anything. The Nehemiah Center has helped us establish a better, clearer vision for our church, and given us tools to implement it."

These positive changes have not come easily, however. "When we arrived at the church, they told us, 'you'll be here two years at the most.'" In its 33 year history, the Belen church had been led by 18 pastors. "There was so much focus on tradition and rules that the church could not grow," Denis explained. Pointing to the objects on the church altar, he said, "I told them, you can take care of the tile and the pulpit, I'm going to take care of the people."

After receiving training from the Nehemiah Center in biblical worldview, Denis and Blanca spent two months teaching the material to their congregation in their Sunday school class.

One area where Denis and Blanca have seen a great change is in the attitude toward the pastoral couple. For a long time, Blanca shared, "they just called me Sister.



Pastors Denis and Blanca Cienfuegos are committed to the transformation of the Subtiava community in Leon.

I felt left out of the ministry. But the Nehemiah Center opened my eyes and helped me see that I do have a part to play—and the congregation calls me Pastor now." Blanca coordinates the women's ministry, working with a team of three others.

The Belen Church has five ministry teams, each carefully chosen and trained in accordance with people's spiritual gifts. "Our new worship team (led by youth) has brought many new people into the church," said Denis. Many of them have also become very active in the community, participating in neighborhood clean-ups, health education, and dengue prevention campaigns.

Blanca has seen the church's impact on the community grow in other ways as a result of their participation in the Mentoring in Biblical Counseling program offered by the Nehemiah Center. "Inner healing is a big need," she says. "Many non-Christian couples have come to us for guidance and counseling."

Recently one couple asked Denis and Blanca to meet with them. "They were struggling because of the husband's past infidelity. During our time with them, they were able to listen to each other, and at the end they cried and hugged each other," Blanca explained. "We saw forgiveness and reconciliation that very day."

While Denis, Blanca, and their church have come a long way, they still have many dreams for the future. "We want our church to be one that organizes, trains, and multiplies. We want to see the restoration of families, beginning with their relationship with God." Last October they began holding Bible studies and other outreach in another neighborhood nearby where they are hoping to plant a new church, "an integral church, where everyone is involved."

Denis is excited about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. "We are just getting started," he says with a smile.