



Building Bridges to Community

UUCW Social Action Committee Unitarian Universalist Church West November 9, 2003

Introduction: Dennis Briley

Good morning. I'm Dennis Briley, chair of Social Action Committee. In introducing today's topic, I'd first like to say something about the role of Social Action Committee. UUCW has a history and culture of social activism in a variety of forms. But this Committee isn't a Social Activists Club within the church. It's a Church Committee that strives to facilitate UUCW's involvement in causes in the larger community. So I'm hoping that you can feel that today's topic is about your project, not a Social Action Committee project.

When the idea of taking a group from UUCW to Nicaragua next summer was first presented to the social action committee last May, we saw this opportunity as a significant step in expanding a vision for service. After some in depth discussions, including whether or not this should be presented to the congregation as an all-church project, the committee concluded that the time was ripe.

We have had a very active committee for the past few years and we have a lot of good things happening. This project takes our social action mission a step beyond what we are already doing and builds on it. Last year Ann Heidkamp raised our sights to the global level with a series of workshops on the economic impacts of globalization. She will be sharing a few of her thoughts as they relate to this project. Eddee Daniel and his family have been to Nicaragua and you will hear from Eddee and Chelsea what the experience is like.

One of the main considerations was how to involve the whole congregation in a project where a representative group would actually do the work. Our conclusions were to conduct a series of awareness-building activities. We had a very successful event a couple weeks ago with a special guest from Nicaragua. We are having this service, and there will be other such activities, both

before and after the trip itself. We are also providing you with an opportunity to support the project directly through pledges to help make it a success. The insights and experiences that the group brings back with them from Nicaragua will be shared with the congregation and we will work together to deepen our own community and the relationships we build with others. We presented these concepts to the Finance Committee and the Board and both endorsed the project unanimously. And so we present to you today, Building Bridges to Community.

Chelsea Kapitan-Daniel

Imagine yourself in a country where all you could see was a valley magnificently beautiful and children laughing at your feet. Where is this country in your imagination? For me it was Nicaragua.

When I first arrived in Nicaragua I had no idea what it was going to be like and what I was going to experience. I didn't know about culture shock, but when I started seeing how different life was there, I truly experienced it and was amazed. I had to get used to a lot of different things such as the culture, the people, the food and the living conditions.

All my life, I have traveled to many different places and countries. This experience, for me, was a very unusual and meaningful one, because I witnessed so many extraordinary events.

During the first week, before we joined the Bridges group, my dad, my two uncles, my aunt and I visited many people and places and saw a lot of the countryside. We went there all together following my grandfather's funeral. We saw my grandfather's house, which was now empty--and we saw the first project that he ever worked on. We talked to many people whose lives he touched. We also saw the beautiful church that he designed.

While we were making houses for a poor family there, as part of the Bridges group, we got to share the work with them. So, in other words, the family helped us while we were helping them. The men worked on the building and the women and children fetched materials and kept us happy. They also kept us hydrated, meaning that they would bring us water if we needed it.

In the morning we would wake up and have a delicious breakfast. Because Nicaragua is in a tropical region, the fruit was really good, and so they always had fresh pineapple that was picked right in front of us. They also had a strange but wonderful fruit called mamones, which were tiny, fuzzy, sour, and grapelike. They really grew on you too. They had so many wonderful fruits there that meals were delicious (even the beans and rice!). We would then drive all the way to our building site over rough roads in a pick-up truck, and on the way we would see the stupendous view of the mountains, and fields full of pineapples and other fruits from the vast farm sites. Once we arrived there, we started working on the houses.

There were all sorts of jobs to be done. We could dig up the sand for the cement and then mix it. We could lay down the bricks on the house. We could also bend steel wires into squares and put them all together to make the steel columns on the houses. Another job could be to cut the bricks, layer the bricks, and fill the cracks and the bricks up with mortar and sand. And yet another job that we could do was to help other people do these things. We would work until about twelve, have lunch, and then rest for about two hours. We would rest because it was the hottest time of the day. Then we would all go back to work at about 2:00 pm...

The evenings were mostly our own down time. We could rest and stay around the house that the group was saying in, or we could take a bucket shower— which was actually kind of cool— it felt

good! Or we could read, or we could hang out with the kids in the neighborhood. There were so many things that we could do, that we never got bored. This one evening, I will never forget. We were all kind of laying around at our common area when a whole bunch of little kids came up and started talking to us in Spanish. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I got an idea. I went inside and brought out a couple of drawing booklets and a whole bunch of markers and crayons that we had brought along. They were all curious because these simple art supplies were so unfamiliar. So they surrounded me and I gave them each a piece of paper and some markers. In a couple of minutes they were all around me coloring and amazing me with the types of things that they were drawing. This inspired me and made me happier too because the day had been really hot and tiring. They were all so cute and adorable.

Another night I played with a whole bunch of the little boys. By throwing around a football we became great friends and kind of connected in a way. It didn't really matter that I couldn't speak Spanish because we were all having so much fun and communicating with each other too.

By the end of the week, the children never wanted to leave my side. They were all attached to me and so we were all great friends. I won't ever forget them and a lot of other people were sad when we had to leave them.

We ended up building a whole house for one family and another half house for another family. "Our family" consisted of two parents and six kids. Their old house had just been a tiny shack, held up by a few sticks and some wood. Whenever it rained, streams of water would run through the ceiling and floor. They were so happy and grateful to move into this house we had built together with them, it felt like a miracle to them. We touched their lives and they did the same to us as well.

Going to Nicaragua changed my perspective on life and really made me see things differently. It made me more open and less prejudiced to other cultures and people with different ethnic backgrounds. This trip also matured me; one way that it matured me was that it made me more grateful for my life in the U.S. The people there didn't have a lot of material stuff, but you could just see the children having so much fun and really enjoying their families. One time we saw a bunch of kids playing in a pile of dirt. They didn't need "stuff" to be happy and to enjoy their day. I will never forget all that I learned and experienced in Nicaragua. I will also never forget all of the friendships and people who touched my life.

On top of that, I will always have a special place in my heart for my grandfather because of his leadership in creating Bridges to Community and allowing me to follow in his footsteps.

Ann Heidkamp

As I was thinking about how to express my commitment to the Bridges to Community project to Nicaragua, I came across this parable by Katie Canon, an African-American feminist theologian:

"Many years ago a world renowned organist came to present a concert in a great hall with a magnificent pipe organ. He entered the hall with a great air of self-importance. After he played each piece the audience showered him with applause. At intermission he went to a back stage room to relax and in the room was an old African American man who was responsible for pumping air through the bellows while the organist played. The old gentleman said "I guess we did a pretty good job, didn't we?" The organist exploded, "How dare you say we!" I am the one who has studied at the great music schools. I am the one the people have come to hear, and only me, not you."

The organist swept out and back on stage. The audience hushed. The organist pressed the keys and nothing happened. Again he pressed – still no sound. The audience rustled and whispered. The organist got up, left the stage and returned to with the old man. The organist said “For a long time I have had the mistaken opinion that I work independently. But I have been wrong. I would like to introduce you to a man without whom this concert cannot take place, the man who works the bellows and supplies the air for the organ.” The concert then proceeded and at the end the organist and bellows-worker stood together to receive the enthusiastic appreciation of the audience.”

Thus the organist was able to recognize that his life was interdependent with the life of another – one totally unlike himself but whose work was indispensable to his own work. They had built a bridge between them.

This theme is echoed in the last sentence of the UUA Statement of Conscience on Economic Globalization. It was passed at the 2003 General Assembly in Boston after two years of study in UU churches around the country - including our own. It says:

“Seeing the world as an interconnected web challenges us to turn from self-serving individualism towards a relational sense of ourselves in a global community, and towards practices that help create economic structures designed to serve the common good.”

To me Katie Canon’s parable and this statement have everything to do with the importance of the Bridges to Community project in Nicaragua as a church-wide project. As UUs we are dedicated to our principle of “... a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Right now working towards that goal requires us to not only build people to people bridges, but to understand the structures and forces of the economic globalization process. Processes that can either increase the inequities and divisions

among the peoples of the world, or more hopefully serve to bridge the gaps between us.

The Bridges to Community project in Nicaragua can help all of us here at UUCW – whether or not we can make the physical journey ourselves - to take our UU principle of a just and peaceful world out of the realm of vision and theory and make it real. Many of us would probably say, “I don’t know anyone from Nicaragua; I don’t have any connection with that country.” After all it is a small country and one of the poorest in the Americas. But we can together explore the country and people of Nicaragua in this year of preparation for the trip, and might be surprised at the extent of our interdependence with them.

Did anyone have coffee this morning? It might have come from Nicaragua; coffee is its largest export crop. Did anyone use a cotton towel? Yes, the cotton could have come from Nicaragua. Did you put sugar and bananas on your cereal? Once again a Nicaraguan might have put them on your table. Did you have sausage instead? Well, it could have come from Nicaraguan cattle. So before coming to church today, chances are you had a connection with someone in Nicaragua – and chances are, just like the organist the connection probably went unnoticed.

But the easy issue in globalization is recognizing that we are connected. After all international trade is nothing new; it has been going on for centuries. But quoting UU Minister David Herndon, the harder issue is confronting the central question of whether these interdependent economic relationships are just. The organist may have recognized his interdependence with the bellows worker but did that make the relationship just? The parable doesn’t raise that question. But the Statement of Conscience on Economic Globalization asks us to. It says: “As people of faith, we are challenged to find ways to promote global economic fairness while maintaining the dynamism of the marketplace.”

Our Bridges to Community project can help us look at this issue as well. I bet many of us buy at least some clothes at Kohl's. Well Kohl's, like most US retailers, works with subcontractors to supply those clothes. One of Kohl's subcontractors has plants in Nicaragua where workers in 2000 were getting 30 cents an hour for 12 hour shifts, 6 days a week. When the workers, mostly young women, tried to unionize they were fired. With Kohl's headquarters based right here in Menomonee Falls, local Milwaukee church and labor leaders took the lead in a national effort to pressure Kohl's management to enforce fair labor practices by their subcontractors. For over a year, Kohl's management resisted, saying they would not interfere with the internal practices of their subcontractors. But with their stores being leafleted and protesters coming to stockholder meetings, Kohl's management relented and agreed to police their subcontractors better. Shortly thereafter the Nicaraguan workers got the right to unionize. Our relationship with Nicaragua will help us discover as a congregation many more opportunities like this where we can help build bridges for a more just and peaceful world – with our brothers and sisters in Nicaragua and in all the similar countries around the world. We could for example take action to ensure strong worker rights and environmental protections in international trade agreements currently under discussion like Free Trade Area of the Americas, Central American Free Trade Agreement and the Plan Pueblo Panama. Because of the interdependent networks of the global economy, working for fair trade agreements not only helps workers in developing countries but also right here in Wisconsin where living wage jobs are rapidly disappearing. So if going to Nicaragua in person is not an option for you, don't say oh well, I'll give a good donation and wish them well. Say, I'll give a donation, wish them well and I'm going to study and work with everyone here at UUCW to figure out how make sure that our Bridge to Community in Nicaragua rests on a firm foundation of just economic relationships. As we do this we will

bring our goal of a world of peace, liberty, and justice for all closer to reality for ourselves, the people of Nicaragua, and for all peoples of the planet.

Eddee Daniel

On my first trip to Nicaragua the group arrived in the Managua airport on Friday evening only to find that the airline had left our baggage in Houston— all eighteen of us. In the US this would have been an annoying inconvenience and we would get our bags the next day, but we happened to arrive on the biggest holiday weekend of the year. That Monday the 19th of July was Nicaragua's Independence Day. There would be no baggage handling until Tuesday. Our things wouldn't reach us, "out in the campo" where we were working, until Wednesday, halfway through our stay. Nicaragua takes independence seriously.

The "campo" where we were to spend the week proved to be a small village in the hills. The graded dirt road comes no closer than three miles. The dirt track up into the hills, we were told, is often impassable even to four-wheel drive vehicles. The local people have no vehicles. They walk or ride horses.

We arrived to discover the absence of many other things we take for granted: no electricity, no telephone, no running water. Until a Bridges to Community brigade dug their first well in 1992, they took all of their water out of the stream, for washing, cooking, and drinking— the same water used by other villages, both upstream and down. And one other thing: there were no stores in the village. Our money was of no use. There was nothing to buy.

We were surrounded and greeted— shyly— by the entire village, about 175 people, comprising twenty extended families. Beyond them roamed their cattle and pigs. Chickens ran around

underfoot. The people seemed healthy, the animals well cared for. The children, hesitantly curious at first, delighted us with their enchanting and spirited energy.

By day we worked alongside the villagers, building a community center. Previous brigades had dug wells and a laundry structure, and the two-room school that we used as our dormitory. Brick by brick, side by side, we raised the walls, and lowered barriers of language and culture. By night, by candlelight, a transcendent peace came over the construction site. We gathered each night to share the contradictions of our experiences. We became timid as we witnessed the strength of their community. They sang, the entire village, and the exuberance of their singing filled the shadowy space, brightening the flickering light. When we, in turn, were asked to sing our voices faltered. Unable to match their unified passion, we found it harder than laying bricks in mid-day sun.

Through our interpreter, they told us that our being there felt like winning the lottery. We could not articulate our own emotions. A week of hard labor, sponge baths, three daily meals of rice and red beans— and their faith, warmth and generosity— and we truly felt that we were the ones to have been blessed and privileged.

At mid-week, when our lost baggage finally arrived it suddenly seemed like an embarrassing extravagance to have so much stuff. It was sobering to realize how unimportant are all the “necessities” we had brought to this village where the houses have no doors, let alone closets full of clothes.

Later, on the ride back into Managua, past the newly built Pizza Hut, and the satellite dishes inside fenced yards, I couldn't help wondering if prosperity will accomplish what millions of dollars of U.S. aid to the Contra revolution could not: deflect and suppress the vivacity of the culture. It is a culture which balances independence with community, with a generosity of spirit that

enabled me to return to the “comforts of home” feeling enriched. I decided that the loss of our baggage was a metaphor; that we needed to cut the cord of our superfluous materialism in order to experience the truth of a place like Nicaragua; a place like our tiny village in the hills, where they possess what is essential, where there is nothing to buy.

Here at UUCW we have a congregation that is very involved in social action, as individuals and as groups within the church. As you have heard in the readings, this is as it should be. We are a people of action as well as contemplation. It is tempting to think of social action— whether it is providing food for the hungry in Wauwatosha, building a Habitat house in Milwaukee, or in Colorado, or going to a third world country— as something that we do for others who are less well off than we are. The truth is more complex than that. In Nicaragua we will certainly produce tangible results in the form of solid, earthquake-proof houses for people currently living under plastic sheeting— no small achievement. Nevertheless, people who have participated in Bridges brigades have invariably spoken of the benefits of being there and the intangible gifts with which they returned.

I live on a cul-de-sac in what is very likely a fairly typical suburban neighborhood. I recognize most of my neighbors by sight. We have even had the occasional block party. But I don't know my neighbors. I don't go into their houses, let alone into their private lives. We are not a community. I drive several miles to this building to get that feeling. A community is people not just in proximity, but in relationship; people with common ground, not in the physical sense, but in terms of shared values. In Nicaragua, community happens wherever people live, because it is the way they live together.

I have been asked, more than once, "Why go to Nicaragua, when there is so much we can be doing in our own community?" One of our shared values as UUs is skepticism. I heard the same

question asked of last summer's trip: "why build a house in Colorado, when there are houses to be built in Milwaukee?" If you attended the service on October 19 you heard from the youth themselves what a powerful experience it was for them to go to Colorado. When representatives of Anonymous came to the social action committee to thank us for our support they said it more simply, but with an added dimension that may not have been as clear in the service: they agreed unanimously that they had to "leave home" in order to free themselves to experience that profound sense of shared community.

Why go to Nicaragua? My father went to Nicaragua in 1992 because the poverty-stricken neighborhood in Yonkers, NY where he lived and served was slowly transforming itself into an immigrant community of people from central America and he found in them a faith and hopefulness that stood in contrast to the despair all around. The following year he "retired" from his ministry in Yonkers and moved to Nicaragua altogether— not exactly a retirement mecca. He co-founded Bridges to Community in order to share his own experience with others from the US. The mission statement of Bridges to Community states that it is a community development organization that takes groups of volunteers to developing countries to work, learn and reflect. Bridges promotes cross-cultural learning, a deepening awareness of our global interdependence, and a commitment to the common good. One of the goals of each trip— or brigade, as they are called— is to expose people to and engage them in something radically different from what they are accustomed. This comes through complete immersion in the culture. The Bridges experience fosters a spirit of solidarity and friendship, deepens one's appreciation for cultural and lifestyle differences, and heightens one's awareness of profound global inequities. As its name symbolizes, the organization tries to create bridges of understanding and trust. It focuses people on both sides of the bridge to build a more just and sustainable world. And it

emphasizes the importance of recognizing the gifts that both sides bring to the table.

One of my father's favorite stories starts with a reluctant volunteer. George was a retired millionaire and a friend had talked him into going on a brigade as a personal favor. He endured riding in the back of a truck over terrible roads. He endured the diet of beans and rice. But at bedtime he found himself in a small room with a dirt floor, sleeping on a cot without a pillow because he had forgotten to bring one along. George swore to himself and thought "what am I doing in a mud hut in Nicaragua?" And he determined to go back to his yacht in Florida the next day. Along about midnight he was aroused from sleep by someone stuffing a pillow under his head. When he awoke in the morning he saw five little kids running around the yard without shirts. One of the mothers had noticed that George needed a pillow. So she took the shirt from one of her kids, stuffed it with the shirts of the other four, and sewed it together as a pillow. George says he gets tears in his eyes every time he thinks of that little lady who had nothing and who gave him everything. George not only stayed, he has returned to Nicaragua numerous times.

But the question— why go to Nicaragua?— is not merely a personal one. It is one that we are asking ourselves as a church community. "Where are you going?" as it was asked in the beautiful anthem; and the answer is not "Nicaragua." Where we are going is "far beyond where the horizon lies," towards a future of our own creation. We are becoming the church we want to be.

We are on the brink of a new era at UUCW. The changes we are contemplating are far-reaching and fairly stunning when you look at them together. We have successfully settled a new minister. We are in the process of becoming both a Welcoming congregation and a green sanctuary. We have a youth group that

is committed to justice and the denomination. We are envisioning a new church, one that is larger, one that can take on greater challenges, one that is, in Nancy Tabor's words last week at Suzelle's installation, "extraordinary."

"Where are you going? Where are you going? –Can you take me with you?" When I first proposed to the social action committee that they consider this kind of project they were excited by the prospect. There were the inevitable questions and concerns– it wouldn't be a UU discussion without those– for we are "putting a pebble in our shoe." We are undertaking something new and challenging. But as the circle grew wider the interest grew in proportion. Both the Finance Committee and the Board of Trustees– after their rounds of questions (as Suzelle said in her sermon last week: you gotta love the questions!)– both the Finance Committee and the Board of Trustees agreed to support this as an all-church project. Further, as the congregation at large has been made aware of the plans, there has been an upwelling of interest and support. And I'll tell you why I think there's been such a positive response: I think it is because we as a congregation are ready to do this. We are ready to put the pebble in our shoe and to "call the pebble dare." And I think many of us have been waiting for an opportunity to go to a place like Nicaragua, to engage in something radically different from what we are accustomed.

And that brings us to the final question: what can you do, those of you who, for many good reasons, cannot travel to Nicaragua? The short answer is that you can pledge your financial support. The longer answer is what Ann was referring to. The reason for making this an official, all-church project is to encourage all of us to identify with its mission, whether or not we can take ten days next summer and go to Nicaragua. While the trip cost of about 1600 dollars is quite reasonable compared to similar activities by Earthwatch and other organizations, still it would limit the numbers who can participate. Therefore, the finance committee

has approved a pledge drive, beginning today, so that you all can contribute to the success of the endeavor and enable more members to participate. By pledging to this project you will be supporting our extraordinary church. Please keep in mind that neither the social action committee nor I is asking you to divert your financial support from the normal canvass pledge that you have made to the church. I believe that we can support this church and this project. We can work for justice here at home, in Milwaukee, and across the globe and link our understanding of both endeavors. And so, let us call the pebble dare. Dare shall be carried. And when we both have traveled far, we shall take dare from our shoe, singing, here is our new road. And then we can join hands, across bridges of trust and understanding, across distances and cultures, knowing that we are there together, and that we can be the church we wish to become.

Introduction of pledge: Dave Olsen, Board of Trustees

In your Order of Service you will find a pledge form. We are asking that you consider making a pledge to the Nicaragua Project. As Eddee said, this pledge would be made in addition to your current church pledge and should not diminish your pledge for the next canvass, which will be starting in March.

In order to demonstrate its support, and to jumpstart the pledge process, the Social Action Committee has donated the first \$1,000 to the project. I am also very happy to announce that we have already received a first pledge for \$200. Our goal is to raise at least \$5,000 for the project.

Please place your completed pledge forms in the box provided in the lobby, or turn them in to members of the social action committee at the Nicaragua table in the social hall.

Pledge forms will be collected through December 7. The donations themselves will be accepted through December 31 of this year. When you make out your check, please be certain to note that it is for the Nicaragua Project in order to avoid confusion with normal church pledge money. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask Eddee or me after the service.