A great Christmas tradition for CDCA is enabling a community to get potable water to each home. We did not succeed this year because of two main reasons:

1. The targeted community, Motastepe, is a squatter settlement off the highway about two miles from Ciudad Sandino. Everything was ready to go when we discovered the residents (being squatters) did not have title to their land, which in the past has been no big issue, but . . .

2. The government has changed here in Nicaragua. A week before Bill Clinton was sworn in as President of the U.S., Arnoldo Alemán was sworn in as president here. President Alemán was elected under very questionable circumstances and no one is sure he will hold true to the land reform laws . . . which is where the community of Motastepe comes in. We do not want to make their land more valuable until they have title themselves, or the existing landowner might decide s/he wants to reclaim the otherwise unused property, especially if it has water. So we are helping Motastepe try to get clear title.

The reversing of land reform laws is not the only fear people have of the current administration. Reversing the autonomy rights of the East Coast with its indigenous peoples and people of African descent; making no election reforms so that more mockery can be made of Nicaragua’s hard-earned but only 18-year-old democracy; eliminating public education and health care completely -- these are just a few issues.

As a result, people in some areas are rearming themselves. Violence has broken out. Please keep this little nation in your prayers. Nicaragua has suffered long enough.

The organic sesame is being processed as this newsletter goes to press. Because the price of organic sesame is low this year, CDCA has decided to pass its share of the profits on to the workers/growers. Lack of profits notwithstanding, there have been many positive aspects of development work that have resulted for us:
- A business has been formed by organic growers to give them an avenue to bargain independently when marketing their crop.
- Three new cooperatives (making a total of 69 growers) have joined and we are now organizing 100 more growers NATIONWIDE (our first nationwide project).
- The processing plant has its own organic certification, thereby allowing various growers to use them instead of having to route all sesame through one umbrella organization.
- And massive work in organizing regarding other needs has also begun, as our widening sesame contacts have connected us with new comarcas (rural communities).

When we first got here we had big dreams of working throughout Central America, but we sensibly started right where we were -- working with the poorest of the poor in the barrios of Ciudad Sandino. We have in the past 2½ years slowly moved to include the rural areas and have gotten services into a handful of comarcas.

As the project continues to spread out in search of land and viable economic opportunities, we spread the work. Motastepe is several miles from Ciudad Sandino proper. We are also organizing several small, isolated comarcas in order to begin to bring services to them. And so our work is taking us miles and miles away.

With the organic sesame growers we are also working nationwide. Hey! Maybe we will someday spread to other countries (but if we do, we will need a great deal more help!)

Nicaraguan Realities (a new item for our newsletter):
- Harsh Reality: An average daily wage is 20-25 córdobas ($2.25 - 2.80). Five pounds of beans (the main staple of the diet here) is 39 córdobas ($4.35).
- Penny Reality: How to move a truck without steering, Nica-style: several men push a bit, stop, kick front tires to turn it, push more; repeat.

Thanks! We are so very aware that we live by the grace of God and the gifts of so many of you. For 1996 there are some special thanks to be said:
- for the Friends of CDCA
- for all of you who contributed money
- for all of you who hosted Sarah, Jessica, Pat and Kathy during their tours
- for Jean Gween and Clare Hanrahon for acting as our treasurers in the States
- for all of you who wrote kind, encouraging notes and letters
- and for all of your prayers

and Needs... We continue to have special needs:
- of course, pledges and contributions for the work
- loans for the microenterprise fund
- more churches to pray for us
- a group in the Piedmont area of the Carolinas who would commit to doing the labor needed for getting out our newsletters, like this one. Producing camera-ready copy in Nicaragua is no problem, but then we have lots of trouble getting the whole batch of finished newsletters to NC. This would be a God-send for us. If you are interested, please call Jim Brown at 1-800-ASHEVILLE or if you have access to email just write us directly. Speaking opportunities in April/May (see next page)
Reflection...

Five days before Christmas, Ervin Mayorga died. Ervin belonged to a joyful family who we see daily because they graciously open their home to us so that we can send email on their phone line. Laughter was always heard and easily joined in.

Ervin and Joseph had a special relationship. They met at Joseph’s baptism when he was two weeks old. Feeling close to all of them, we were more involved in Nicaraguan rituals of death. When someone dies, the body is buried within 24 hours. Friends and family clean and dress the body; gather in the house and spread into the streets; and watch and wait until the burial. They say prayers/rossary for nine days, then have worship/mass and another all-night wake on the ninth day.

Ervin died in the ocean while trying to get a friend back towards safety. It was a sudden tragedy. Gloria’s little concrete house suddenly went from a Christmas festival mood into deep mourning. Almost every physical thing inside changed for the nine days.

The family had liked "the spirit" at Joseph’s baptism, so Gloria asked us to do something for the ninth day wake. We didn’t know what we were doing, but we trudged ahead.

During the worship, while Mike was stumbling through the Spanish reading of the resurrection (not the same language as latrines, potable water, organic pesticide, etc.), I looked around and thought, "Why? Why Ervin? Why now? Why can’t the poor get some kind of a break? Why? Why? Why?"

Then it was time to sing our last song. It was in English so Mike translated it. Kathy helped them repeat the chorus so they could join in, and we all sang:

Alleluia, the Great Storm is Over,
Lift up your wings and fly.

We sang about a mama singing, during a storm, a hula-ho to her child about "a love that has vanquished the powers of hell... sweetness on the air and justice on the wind, laughter in the house where mourners had been. The deaf shall have music, the blind have new eyes, the standards of death taken down by surprise. Release for the captives, an end to the wars, streams in the desert, new hope for the poor. The little lost children shall dance as they sing and play with the bears and the lions in spring."

The choruses got louder as voices joined in with each repeat 'til by the last time it filled the little house.

For me, Nicaragua is kind of like continually living in Lent or Good Friday. The storm seems to be brewing, gaining force and fury, to lash out on the poor. People seem daily to be crucified to greed.

But in that little house filled with sadness, grief, tragedy, and emptiness, as that chorus got louder and louder, Sunday came pecking through for me and I saw that maybe indeed:

Alleluia! the Great Storm is Over!
Lift up your wings and fly!

Please Note: Many of you write notes with your contributions or write letters to us. We want to explain how we get information down here. First checks, letters, etc., get sent to our U.S. address. A friend there sends checks to our treasurer (who then notifies us via email) and she sends letters, notes, slips, etc., to us via air mail periodically, or with a person coming down. We then respond and send our letters back via courier (someone then hopefully and most always drops them in the mail U.S. of A. WHICH IS TO SAY: "It takes a while to hear best — always fine-tuning. Please be patient. Thanks.

Our 1996 Annual Report is available upon request.

Sarah is getting her spring tour ready now for April and May. She is focusing on Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina with some North Carolina stops. If you would like to hear more about us, then call Jim Brown at 1-800-ASHEVILLE (inside the Asheville exchange please call 251-4401) and leave a message, or email us directly.

We enjoyed having TFT (yes! a gift enabled us to bring him home) and Jessica home for Christmas. They were here almost a month. It was great! But so hard to send them back to the U.S.

On 30 January Joseph turned one and two days later Conry turned eight. We were especially happy to have the boys' best friends, Nick and Nicole Trowell, here with them. Daniel is quietly absorbing Spanish but refusing to speak it.

Pat (as we all are) is glad to have a fellow grower, Nick Argentati, here for three months. He’s from Savannah and took an overland trip here via bus and train and nine long days.

Kathy is once again keyboard deep in year-end books. Mike has been developing ulcers regarding the sesame. Kathleen will be thrilled when Joseph decides to start sleeping through the night!

We were overjoyed at the birth of César's new son, Carlos — welcome!