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More Good Than Harm: Moral action and evaluation in international religious volunteer travel

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MORE GOOD THAN HARM: MORAL ACTION AND EVALUATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOLUNTEER TOURISM

LiErin Probasco

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Abstract

How do people learn interaction rules for bridging vast differences in culture, class, and interpersonal power? I study transnational encounters during religious volunteer tourism between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Analyses draw on two years of fieldwork with two Christian relief and development organizations and over 220 interviews with U.S. and Nicaraguan aid participants. Personal connections between donors and recipients generate resources for international development programs. They can also disrupt efforts to distribute aid effectively and equitably. I argue that private transnational aid provision operates as a balancing act between a desire for interpersonal connections and a conviction that aid should be systematic.

Chapters explain how orienting practices frame cross-national contact, how travelers and Nicaraguans experience and interpret humanitarian interactions, and how encounters shape claims of personal and social change. "Episodic" orientations promote the idea that spontaneous personal connections liberate individuals from the constraints of social inequality. Yet efforts to counter systematic inequalities shape these encounters, as when girls receive more long-term material and emotional support than boys. "Embedded" orientations emphasize the need to monitor and manage interpersonal intimacy to avoid reproducing patterns of dominance and dependence. I find emotional intimacy can both undermine and catalyze systematic aid provision programs.

Nicaraguan responses to aid gifts appeal to travelers as either economic patrons or as fellow religious actors. Aid recipients using patron-client language emphasize

their helplessness, while those using a religious model express personal agency. Finally, orientations shape claims about post-travel behavior. Travelers with episodic orientations speak of self-directed changes like spiritual growth, while those with embedded orientations focus on future engagement with a Nicaraguan partner community. Contrary to previous research, I find neither orientation helps travelers connect their experience to insights or action about poverty alleviation in their home communities. While aware of travel's reputation to "transform" lives, U.S. respondents largely use other language to describe its impact. They view travel as an opportunity to step outside their daily routines and re-examine the alignment of their values and actions. For adult travelers, religious volunteer tourism is both a means of assessing one's moral identity and an action taken to alleviate poverty.

Acknowledgements

A Nicaraguan man standing in the half-finished structure that would be his house told one volunteer team, "I know my heart is very small to pay you back, my brothers and sisters." His words perfectly capture how I feel about the support I received in writing this dissertation. First and foremost, thanks to those who graciously allowed me and my tape recorder into their lives and their homes, answered my nosy questions, cared for me when I was ill, and otherwise took this journey with me. I can only hope this dissertation begins to do justice to their vision and compassion.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I traveled to Nicaragua with religious volunteers from the United States twelve times between 2009 and 2011. Alongside these volunteers, I helped build houses, a church, and a school. I sang songs, played baseball, and swam in creeks with Nicaraguan children. I met and befriended Nicaraguan adults who taught me to bend rebar with hand tools or to cook *nacatamales* and who shared their life stories with me in interviews. Volunteers from the U.S. and I also fielded requests from Nicaraguans to sponsor educations, donate medicines, and build brick or concrete houses to replace ramshackle structures with plastic sheeting for walls.

"Jeyson" was a Nicaraguan tour guide, though his weak English skills limited his employment opportunities.[1] When he had the opportunity, he volunteered with missionary groups to build houses. Jeyson and I bonded over a shared love for silly jokes, especially the puns he tried to explain to me in slow, clear Spanish. One morning, Jeyson pulled me aside to raise a matter for my consideration. "I want to have a computer for my children," he explained in Spanish. He described at length the costs and benefits of buying or renting a computer. "Everyone here in Nicaragua knows that it is good to learn English and to learn how to use a computer," he said. With four children to put through high school, renting one could add up. He concluded, "In the long term, it would probably be better to buy a computer than to rent one over and over again."

I was at a loss for a response. On the surface, Jeyson was asking for advice, but we both knew he was asking me to find him a computer. The organization we were

[1] Jeyson is a pseudonym, as are all the personal names in this text except my own.

working with discouraged such requests. I put off a direct answer for as long as possible. Instead, we both treated the question as a hypothetical: how might we go about getting a laptop? We talked about aid organizations that provided computers, about Internet access, about computer viruses, and even about loans or payment installment plans. Finally, he asked outright, "Maybe you could help or you could think of something to help?"

I was acutely uncomfortable and even angry with Jeyson for putting me in such an awkward position. Everything I was learning about the "right" ways to provide aid told me that giving his family a computer was the wrong decision. Yet to say no meant letting down a new friend. I knew the competitive edge and skill set his children would gain by having access to a computer at home. If only I would sacrifice $250 to buy a no-frills netbook. I was annoyed with his question. I also was acutely aware of how painful it must have been for him to ask. What if we both ended up so embarrassed that our friendship was never the same? I felt guilty for such thoughts, because I realized he was doing something much more difficult than I was. For the sake of his children, he had swallowed his pride and let go of his identity as a co-volunteer to become a supplicant.

I offered several excuses I hoped would save face for us both. "I need to think about what the options are," I said. And, "I need to talk to my husband." I even used my position as a researcher as an excuse. "My school will not let me give gifts to my research subjects," I said, "So I would not be able to help you now. And your children need help now, not in a couple of years after my project is over."[2]

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[2] My school did not disallow gifts per se, but I made an early decision not to offer Nicaraguan interviewees compensation or gifts in exchange for their time. In research with vulnerable populations, compensation raises concerns about informed consent. Offers of gifts or money may

"Yes, yes," he reassured me. "Well, I have been thinking about this for a while. And I thought that because you have come here and your husband has come here, I wanted to ask you. But I understand that you need to think about it." By the next day, we were laughing together again. For the rest of that day, however, an awkward silence hung between us.

Personalizing Humanitarian Aid

In the past century, the practice of religious volunteer tourism has emerged as a way for ordinary people in developed and developing countries to experience face-to-face encounters of humanitarian aid. During faith-based international volunteer trips, travelers typically spend less than two weeks working with existing faith-based development organizations or local churches on a wide variety of projects. They meet, learn from, and attempt to help impoverished families and communities. They may build houses, dig wells, provide medical or technical assistance, or run Vacation Bible Schools for youth. Local community residents accept and ask for travelers' assistance. These hosts also offer hospitality, physical labor, and insight into the community and local culture.

For as long as people have been taking these short trips, critics have raised concerns about their negative impact. In 1968, for example, Roman Catholic priest Ivan Illich gave a vehement speech to a group of college students preparing to spend a summer volunteering in Mexico. He roundly chastised "do-gooders" for imagining that

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coerce participation from impoverished research subjects. My awareness of this potential danger helped me say no to requests in emotionally charged encounters like this one with Jeyson.

goodwill and the desire to make the lives of others "better" could ever make up for the damaging paternalism that he saw as inherent in the short-term volunteer experience. In meticulous detail, he described the gap between intentions and outcomes and urged travelers to reconsider their plans.[3]

Today, volunteer travel remains a popular way for private citizens to participate in international aid. Over one-third of U.S. congregations sponsor international volunteer or mission trips, with approximately 1.6 million adult participants annually.[4] Among adults, 15 percent report participation in a high school mission trip,[5] and 41 percent of 16-20 year olds report participation in some form of religious volunteer service or travel, domestic or international.[6]

These faith-based trips are just one example of the ways international aid has become increasingly personalized. Through child sponsorship, internet-based microloans, and volunteer tourism, donors today have many opportunities to learn about the lives of the specific recipients of their support and to put a human face on their acts of charity. This personalization has accompanied an increasing privatization of international aid. Since the mid-1990s, private donations from the U.S. for international relief and development have exceeded government aid.[7] In 2010, U.S. residents contributed $39 billion in private donations to relief and development assistance in other countries, including $3.7 billion in volunteer hours.[8]

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[3] Illich, "To Hell with Good Intentions."
[4] Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Trinitapoli and Vaisey, "Transformative Religious Experience."
[7] Little, "Role of Private Assistance."
[8] *The Index of Global Philanthropy*.

"Empathy inspires generosity," explains Matt Flannery, co-founder of Kiva.org, the first online microloan system that matches individual lenders to small-scale entrepreneurs in the developing world. The website posts stories and photos of people requesting loans, and lenders post profiles of their own. Flannery believes sharing these stories and pictures helps foster understanding between people from "completely different universes." As he puts it, "When understanding increases, so does empathy. When empathy increases, so does generosity. People are inherently more generous towards people and causes they understand."[9]

While the premise of direct-aid programs is to facilitate generosity through understanding, the history of contact between cultures has hardly been marked by beneficence or understanding. When wealthy, powerful people enter the lives and territories of people of poorer nations, the story rarely ends well for the locals. Even with the best of intentions, contact across differences in languages and customs can create serious misunderstandings. For this reason, many of the "best practices" in international relief and development efforts are designed to avoid the complications and collateral damage that can accompany contact between the wealthy and the poor. My research examines the dynamics of these face-to-face transnational aid encounters through a study of Christians from the U.S. who travel to Nicaragua for a week at a time to offer time, money, and labor and to learn about community development programs.

The popularity of religious volunteer travel attests to a widely held conviction that cross-cultural encounters between wealthy and poor enrich the lives of both. Yet thoughtful travelers grapple with the concerns Illich and others have raised. They worry

[9] Flannery, "Kiva CEO and Co-Founder."

that their intent to change lives for the better can also do more harm than good. Many editorials, guidebooks, workshops, accreditation programs, and even seminary courses exist to help trip leaders and travelers think through difficult ethical dilemmas.[10] On the plus side, travelers anticipate powerful emotional connections that will widen their worldviews, deepen their religious faith, and inspire new behaviors such as volunteering more or spending less on luxuries. They also expect that they have more to offer the poor in other countries than a monetary donation to a reputable charity. They offer labor, gifts, affection, and sometimes professional skills. There are also anticipated downsides to travel. Transportation, room and board, and tourism dollars travelers spend on themselves may well exceed the dollar value of their labor and material donations to a local community.[11] Moreover, an influx of cash and gifts may suppress local economic growth, thereby encouraging economic and cultural dependencies. Uneven distributions of aid among families within a community or among communities within a region may foster internal conflicts. The increase in tourist presence may also accelerate the subversion of local ways of life through the exportation of U.S. values, what Illich referred to as the materialism and militarism of a U.S. middle-class lifestyle.

Religious volunteer tourists have ultimately decided that the potential value of a face-to-face encounter outweighs the potential harm. Personal encounters between

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[10] Books on the subject come with titles such as *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*; *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor*; and *Effective Engagement in Short-term Missions: Doing It Right!* Organizations can opt to undergo a peer review in order to achieve accredited status with the Fellowship of Short-Term Mission Leaders, which evaluates compliance with seven "standards of excellence."

[11] In their *Sociology of Religion* article "Transnational Religious Connections," Wuthnow and Offutt estimate the dollar value of volunteer labor for 1.6 million adults taking one-week trips is $1.1 billion. They also suggest $1000 per person is a conservative estimate for flight costs for international travel. Thus, for airfare alone those same 1.6 million travelers are likely paying about a half-a-billion dollars more in flight costs than they are donating in volunteer labor hours.

travelers and hosts distinguish volunteer travel from mass tourism or from more traditional charitable activity such as writing a check or clicking a PayPal link. Practitioners and researchers alike speculate that the "power of presence" in these encounters is the mechanism through which volunteer travel becomes transformative for both travelers and hosts. Yet these accounts are often based more on a vision of desirable transformation than on lived experiences of encounter with its awkward miscommunications and unintended consequences. The focus on outcomes and post-travel narratives fails to examine travel as an embodied practice where moral reasoning and justifications take place alongside and in relation to emotionally rich and physically or mentally taxing cross-cultural interactions.

I apply analytical lenses from the studies of interaction rituals and cultural sociology to a study of the relief and development efforts of Christian travelers from the U.S. and Nicaraguan communities. I address three primary questions. First, how do travelers and hosts learn interaction rules for bridging vast differences in culture, wealth, and interpersonal power? Second, how do those interaction rules help people navigate specific moral dilemmas that arise during face-to-face humanitarian aid encounters? And finally, how do these orientations and encounters lead to divergent claims about changes in the lives of Nicaraguan and U.S. participants in the weeks and months following the conclusion of the trip? Answers to each of these questions tell a story about the personalization of humanitarian aid and about the ways people try to build bridges of social solidarity across durable differences such as nation and wealth.

As the story that opens this chapter suggests, efforts to blend interpersonal solidarity and systematic aid provision can be messy. The friendship between Jeyson and I was made possible because of our opposing but complementary roles in a global

social structure. I was a traveler and potential patron, and Jeyson was a host and potential aid recipient. Our mutual empathy and understanding increased as we got to know each other, as did my desire to be generous to him. To act on that generosity might be emotionally rewarding for us both and materially rewarding for him. However, action would also underscore the global social structures that led me to be in a position to play the role of patron and Jeyson to be in a position of want and supplication. The stories and encounters that animate this dissertation reveal how travelers such as I and hosts such as Jeyson navigate the confusing but rewarding practices of religious volunteer travel that personalize humanitarian aid. In answering the three questions I have identified, this dissertation argues that rather than separating a desire for emotional connections from efforts to address structural inequalities, religious volunteer tourism blends the two deliberately, if not always successfully.

Cross-Cultural Caregiving

Sociologists Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman, Randall Collins, and others have argued that people construct meaning in interaction with others. In routine interactions, people can usually expect to share a broad repertoire of cultural tools for making sense of their encounters. For example, people in the U.S. who run into a casual acquaintance often ask, "How are you?" The expected response will be brief and usually positive: "Fine, thanks, and you?" A negative or ambiguous reply is generally understood to be a signal that the person being greeted wants a longer conversation and a chance to explain his or her state of mind. This common conversation follows a kind of cultural *script* where participants both know what is expected to happen.

Transnational aid encounters during religious volunteer travel are different. Participants cannot expect to share a language, much less a set of symbols, scripts, or narratives for predicting the outcomes of an encounter or the meanings people will take away from it.

Global encounters across differences in language, moral commitments, traditions, and practices are filled with "creative friction." Anthropologist Anna Tsing coined the term "friction" to describe the messy, awkward, but creative ways that global connections transform cultures and relations of power.[12] The physical force of friction simultaneously slows movement and makes movement possible. In the same way, the transmission of cultural knowledge encounters friction from the missed connections, misunderstandings, and emotionally and physically taxing work of interacting across divides of language, nation, moral commitments, and cultural mores. These messy interactions shift the momentum or change the trajectory of and can *transform* the chained rituals of interaction that transmit and create cultural meanings. Ultimately, Tsing argues that universalizing impulses — concepts such as human rights or sustainable development — become meaningful not as a creeping, isomorphic, and hegemonic invasion of the local. Instead, "universal" ideas gain power and salience in local lives in fractured ways through an uneven series of specific encounters across difference that transform *both* the local and the universal.

What practices construct volunteer travel as a friction-filled and potentially transformative encounter? What kinds of meanings and tangible outcomes do these practices actually generate? Anthropologist Brian Howell's groundbreaking

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[12] Tsing, *Friction*.

ethnography of short-term mission travel proposes that a *narrative of mission* instilled before departure guides people's actions and interpretations during travel. I agree that constructing such narratives is a central meaning-making practice that draws attention to some types of interactions or aid provision and away from others. However, Howell's travelers are Evangelical Christians who embrace the concept of "mission" as a metanarrative for travel. The travelers I study are largely mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic, and most tend to use a "mission" narrative as a foil, defining their experiences in opposition to a goal of transforming the spiritual lives of the Nicaraguans they encounter. Thus, I consider alternate ways that stories and talk among travelers are used to focus attention on the opportunities and complications of poverty alleviation efforts in a face-to-face context. The emphasis on narrative is also grounded in language, while interactions between travelers and locals often take place without any words at all. Drawing on the insights of interaction ritual theorists, I also pay attention to the ways that *emotions* and interaction *rhythms* teach travelers how to behave when the meet local residents and how to think about the short-term and long-term consequences of their cross-national interactions.

Whatever the motivations of travelers or hosts, these trips are grounded in poverty alleviation and international development practices. This context of aid provision informs the kinds of moral dilemmas people face and the kinds of friction they feel when they approach transnational encounters. One of these dilemmas involves the question: how can I most effectively contribute to the alleviation of poverty in this community? The two organizations I study construct very different narratives to frame traveler efforts to help. One organization champions the idea that personal connections help to transcend social inequalities; they argue the problem of poverty can be solved

one person – one encounter – at a time. The other organization argues that personal ties are powerful motivations but must be monitored and managed in order to effectively foster long-term development. As I will argue, both groups ultimately demonstrate that the seemingly incompatible outlooks of personal aid and community-wide development are, in practice, blended in diverse ways, often with unpredictable results.

Since travel centers on acts of generosity, it also calls attention to the construction of moral identities. Just as identities are shaped by social status and by social categories such as race, class, and gender, people create a sense of themselves as *moral* beings that strive to be virtuous and to do right. Insofar as travelers and hosts experience and evaluate acts of generosity or virtue in their face-to-face interactions, they are crafting moral identities. They ask themselves, usually subconsciously, what do these interactions communicate about the *kind* of good person I want to be? Here, development discourses of empowerment and social scientific theories of cultural agency inform my findings. To understand how travel is constructed as transformative, I first ask how travelers and hosts think about themselves as people who can or cannot change their own lives or the lives of people in their communities. With these theories, I address from a new perspective a traditional subject of research into volunteer tourism: namely, whether travel results in tangible changes in the lives of travelers or hosts.

Research Design

I pursue my research questions through a case study of religious volunteer tourism between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Latin America and the Caribbean are popular destinations for religious volunteer travel. One study finds that nine of the fifteen most

popular volunteer tourism destinations are in Latin America and the Caribbean, and three are in Central America.[13] Short-term religious travel to Central America in the past 30 years has had two main motivations: poverty alleviation and political solidarity. Nicaragua is not the most popular travel destination, but it is a compelling site for studying the intersecting motivations of poverty alleviation and solidarity. In the Americas, it is second only to Haiti in terms of poverty and reliance on foreign aid.[14] In the past 40 years, Nicaragua has experienced a dynastic dictatorship, a successful socialist revolution, a civil war, a peaceful concession of power by the revolutionary government, and its return to power through democratic elections. The U.S. government intervened significantly throughout these turbulent years.[15] Religious activists in the U.S. joined progressive and socialist activists from around the globe in a transnational solidarity movement. Some traveled to Nicaragua as *brigadistas* or brigade workers providing services like agriculture labor, healthcare, and literacy training while learning about the revolution and civil war.[16] Today, Nicaragua is not a particularly popular destination for foreign tourists; volunteers in matching team t-shirts, mostly religious, dominate the foreign faces on flights to and from the Managua International Airport.

I study religious volunteer travelers and the Nicaraguan communities they visit through two U.S.-based non-profits that facilitate travel. I call these organizations *Manos por Dios* (Hands for God) and Partners in Solidarity.[17] Both organizations stress the

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[13] Priest and Priest, "Short-term Mission and Service Learning."
[14] United Nations, "National Accounts Main Aggregates Database"; World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
[15] Walker, *Nicaragua*; Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas*.
[16] Jones, *Brigadista*.
[17] I change the names of organizations, villages, and individuals to preserve their privacy. However, I do not change any of the major cities, landmarks, or states named. For the two organizations, I chose pseudonyms to reflect their respective missions (service vs. partnership) and to reflect common

expression of faith through relief and development efforts rather than proselytizing or conversion. However, they differ in mission and structure. Manos por Dios offers more traditional deployment of short-term volunteers to aid in their long-term mission work, while Partners in Solidarity facilitates sustained relationships between U.S. congregations and Nicaraguan communities. Staff of the two agencies also express divergent views of Nicaraguan politics. These different approaches affect organizational framing of cross-national encounters and of the transformative impacts travel is imagined to have.

Between April 2009 and March 2011, I traveled with nine teams on twelve trips. I visited eight Nicaraguan communities and five U.S. congregations whose members participated in travel. I conducted pre- and post- travel interviews with 82 U.S. travelers and on-site interviews with 81 Nicaraguan residents of communities affected by foreign aid. In addition, I conducted informational interviews with agency staff, and I implemented focus groups with members of the religious congregations to which travelers belonged.

Chapter Outline

This chapter has introduced the three questions that motivate my study: How do people learn interaction rules for transnational aid encounters? How do they navigate unfolding interactions? And how do encounters shape post-travel claims about the meaning of trips in daily life? The chapter also introduces the key theoretical claims and

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organizational practice. "Manos por Dios" travelers and staff usually used Spanish or Spanglish when naming their organization, while "Partners in Solidarity" travelers and staff defaulted to English.

perspectives that inform my analyses. In Part One, "Preparing," I detail the literature, data, and methods that inform this research and introduce the concepts of "episodic" and "embedded" orientations to travel. In Chapter Two, I situate my analysis in relation to the research literatures on two social practices: short-term mission trips and volunteer tourism. I then discuss how people learn to navigate transnational interactions, drawing on insights of interaction theories, narrative analysis, and cultural sociology. Finally, I examine the ideas about charity, development, and moral identity that inform travelers' and hosts' interpretations of aid-driven encounters.

Chapter Three explains my research design, which comprises two years of fieldwork in two countries and approximately 220 interviews with U.S. and Nicaraguan participants in volunteer tourism. I explain my choice of field site and describe the communities, organizations, and individuals I study. I also address the advantages and limits of my unusual approach to fieldwork, where I embedded myself not in a geographic community but within transient teams of foreign tourists.

Chapter Four introduces the practices through which organizations oriented volunteer tourists to either an "episodic" or an "embedded" approach to making sense of their cross-national encounters. Through rule giving and storytelling, organizational staff used place, emotion, and a sense of timing to "sell" the significance of contact as either deeply personal and idiosyncratic or embedded in specific social histories and systems. The episodic approach implied that personal cross-national ties could liberate individuals from the constraints of social inequality, instead placing the authority and impetus for change in the hands and hearts of individuals. The embedded approach depicted interpersonal intimacy as a powerful force that must be monitored and managed in order to avoid reproducing patterns of dominance and dependency.

In Part Two, U.S. travelers and Nicaraguan hosts encounter one another in the context of humanitarian aid provision. Chapters Five and Six show how the orientations described in Chapter Four shape the actions of travelers when they come face-to-face with children living in poverty. The episodic view of Manos por Dios promotes a conviction that poverty can be solved one person at a time. Chapter Five explains how this one-at-a-time approach resulted in systematically gendered patterns of aid provision. Encouraged to make personal connections, Manos por Dios travelers formed spontaneous bonds with children that mixed emotional connections with material sponsorship. Anxieties and hopes about the futures of specific children were informed by gendered expectations about appropriate social roles. Travelers believed boys needed *reform* to channel their leadership into legitimate social paths, while girls needed education and *rescue* from teen pregnancy. These anxieties manifested in divergent forms of sponsorship. Boys received attention and gifts such as clothes or cash. Girls got encouraging lectures about education, and some were "adopted" and developed lasting personal ties to a foreign "godparent."

At Partners in Solidarity, interpersonal patronage is discouraged. Chapter Six follows one congregation as it tried to apply its "embedded" orientation to community-level interventions. The emotional bonds of team members to a particular teenage girl both facilitated and challenged the group's commitment to that embedded orientation. This chapter examines how the practices of an embedded approach helped teams channel their charitable impulses into ambitious, large-scale development projects. When the girl's life was endangered, however, the congregation realized that those same embedded practices failed to offer meaningful guidance in situations where exclusive attention to social justice and structural inequalities threatened individual

lives. The congregation "violated" its principles to intervene on the girl's behalf. Using an embedded approach provided the team with discursive tools to accomplish the significant repair work required to restore the team's moral identity as a group that pursued collective, not individual, solutions to poverty.

Chapter Seven uses gift exchange theory to explain how Nicaraguan aid recipients reacted to receiving significant material support such as an educational scholarship or a house. With little exposure to either organization's orienting strategies, these recipients drew on their own local cultural models for understanding and enacting relationships with materially and politically powerful interaction partners. In patron-client scripts, recipients emphasized the initiative and power of foreign donors, ignoring the many ways Nicaraguans actively sought out aid or attempted to reciprocate. In religious scripts, Nicaraguans portrayed themselves as active supplicants and worthy Christians. They also described social inequalities between themselves and volunteer tourists as part of a divine plan. Ultimately, religious scripts that portray a pro-active and deserving aid recipient have greater traction with religious volunteer tourists and within dominant global development discourses. This traction may facilitate continued aid from foreign donors. However, ontological claims about social inequality leave little space for Nicaraguans to play any role other than impoverished beneficiary of foreign munificence.

Part Three documents the meanings that travel continues to have for volunteer tourists when they return home. Chapter Eight examines how the daily practice of group reflection during trips shaped travelers' post-trip explanations of the meaning of travel for their daily lives. I argue that reflexive talk is the primary "meaning-making" practice of travel. Along with social location, reflexivity powerfully shapes post-travel

claims about a trip's impact on the lives of travelers. While daily reflection is a common practice across volunteer tourism experiences, the practice varies across organizations, leading to divergent ways of making meaning from one's travel encounters. Manos por Dios encouraged personal, internally focused reflection ("What does this experience mean *for me*?"), while Partners in Solidarity practiced a *social reflexivity* that encouraged travelers to imagine the ramifications of an experience on the future relationship between themselves and local hosts. Contrary to the hopes of many practitioners and researchers, I find neither form of reflexivity provided volunteers with a reason to link their travel experiences to domestic outreach efforts.

Chapter Nine argues that research focused on post-trip changes in the attitudes or behavior of travelers fails to address a widespread interpretation of the purpose of such travel. Rather than speaking of change, adult travelers tended to frame travel as an opportunity to bring their *values* and their *actions* into greater harmony. In this conception, they saw travel as an opportunity to re-evaluate their taken-for-granted moral identities. The physical and cultural distances of travel allowed them to "see" their habits more clearly. Since this particular form of travel involved humanitarian aid and interacting with impoverished people, the habits travelers were most likely to reevaluate centered on consumption, materialism, and charitable giving. For some, especially younger travelers and those approaching major life transitions such as childbearing or retirement, travel prompted significant changes in both identity and behavior. For others, travel was simply a way to live out a long-held moral identity. For the majority, travel was a practice of "renewal" or "recalibration," the latter often described as a reinvigorated commitment to resisting the siren call of materialism.

In Chapter Ten, I summarize my dissertation's argument about the construction and deployment of two distinct orientations that guide face-to-face interactions during religious volunteer travel. These orientations also shape the ways adult travelers and their hosts speak about their interactions as part of longer-term projects of both aid provision and personal development. This dissertation's detailed examination of these orientations and encounters documents experiences that challenge many assumptions about how personal contact and sustainable development combine or conflict in international aid work. This closing chapter identifies both practical and conceptual implications of these encounters.

Part 1: Preparing

The next three chapters address both my own preparation for researching religious volunteer tourism and organizational efforts to prepare travelers for volunteering in a foreign community. Chapters Two and Three describe the histories, theories, and methods that inform my research. Chapter Two details how short-term international volunteering emerged as both a religious and a secular practice in the 20th century. It also identifies key theoretical insights from the anthropological and sociological research literatures that shape my analyses. Chapter Three explains why Nicaragua is an appropriate site for research on religious volunteer tourism and explains the impacts of the history of U.S.–Nicaraguan foreign relations on contemporary tourism encounters in Nicaragua. The chapter also explains my research design, which comprises two years of fieldwork and over two hundred twenty interviews with Christian travelers from the United States and residents of eight Nicaraguan communities.

Chapter Four turns to organizational practices that prepare travelers and residents to encounter one another in the contexts of humanitarian aid and community development programs. The organizations I study concentrated most of this orienting work during the early days of a trip. Through rules and stories, organizations oriented travelers and Nicaraguans to a particular understanding of the meaning of travel and to a particular set of expectations for how to behave in interactions with one another.

Chapter Two: Researching Humanitarian Travel

International aid is personalized through action and interactions. In this case, those actions are the practices that make up a religious volunteer experience. Volunteer tourists and local hosts dig ditches, pour concrete, share meals, laugh, and cry. Tourists and hosts talk to one another some. Tourists talk among themselves a great deal. Through these physical, emotional, and cognitive practices, people assess their assumptions about the causes, consequences, and solutions to global poverty. They confront practical dilemmas that affirm or challenge their ideas about how personal contact can enhance or hinder international poverty alleviation efforts. They also construct moral identities as generous donors or worthy aid recipients and confront challenges to preconceived notions about how to be a good parent, citizen, or friend.

This chapter explains what *kind* of social practice religious volunteer travel is. Two practices shape the experience of religious humanitarian travel: short-term mission trips and volunteer tourism. I explain how the distinct histories and research agendas of these practices converge in my own research. I also explain how insights from theories of interaction, narrative, and cultural repertoires shape my approach to documenting the social construction of cross-national aid encounters. Finally, I elaborate on ideas about aid, international development, generosity, and moral identity that inform the approaches travelers and hosts take to enacting and interpreting humanitarian encounters.

Defining a Practice: Religious Volunteer Tourism

The practices of short-term mission trips and volunteer tourism overlap in many ways, and scholars have asked similar questions about them. Who travels? Does the experience influence later civic engagement and activism? What are the impacts of travel on the local community? However, the two kinds of travel emerge from different historical trajectories, carry with them different negative baggage, and fuel different subjects of scholarly debate. Here I detail the history, scope, and research agendas associated with each. While neither term perfectly captures the experiences of respondents in this study, I describe these experiences as "religious volunteer tourism" for two reasons. First, more people I interviewed objected to the term mission trip than embraced it. Second, the preoccupations of the people and organizations I studied matched more nearly the interests of scholars of volunteer tourism, who focus on encounters and sustainable development, than matched the interests of scholars of international mission trips, who focus on transformation and religious or civic engagement. That said, each of these themes (encounter, sustainable development, transformation, and civic engagement) arise in my own research and to some extent in the related research agendas of scholars on both subjects.

Short-term Missions

Sociologists Kurt Beyerlein, Jenny Trinitapoli, and Gary Adler define the *short-term mission trip* as religiously organized long-distance travel that often includes charitable service work, education about other cultures, education about social justice,

evangelism, or some combination thereof.[1] Mission trip participants typically travel in groups for periods of one to two weeks at a time.[2] The destination and duration of such travel varies, as do the activities pursued. Perhaps the three most common practices associated with mission trips are Christian evangelism, construction, and medical assistance. Christian evangelism is both the best known and most controversial of these practices. However, a survey of seminary student travelers found that more than four-fifths of mission trip participants go to countries where Christianity is already established.[3] The meaning of evangelism for many travelers has shifted away from proselytizing toward a more nuanced idea of nurturing Christian disciples through holistic development that addresses material and spiritual poverty.[4]

Today, 32 percent of U.S. congregations sponsor an international mission trip each year, sending over 1.6 million adults overseas.[5] This number is a significant underestimate of the total number of annual travelers. It does not include domestic mission trips, youth travelers, or those who travel with parachurch or non-profit organizations. The National Study of Youth and Religion estimates one in five fifteen- to twenty-year-olds in the U.S. has participated in religious service projects or domestic or international mission trips.[6] These numbers also fail to reflect the global scope of mission travel; not all travelers come from North America. A survey of pastors in

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[1] Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "Youth Civic Engagement."
[2] Wuthnow's *Boundless Faith* reports an average of 18 people per trip with 83 percent of trips lasting less than 2 weeks.
[3] Priest and Priest, "Short-Term Mission and Service Learning."
[4] An articulation of this theological construction of poverty from an Evangelical Christian perspective can be found in Myers's *Walking with the Poor*.
[5] Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*.
[6] Trinitapoli and Vaisey, "Transformative Religious Experience."

Thailand who hosted mission groups finds as many had hosted South Korean visitors (51 percent) as had hosted groups from the U.S. (55 percent).[7]

Scholars interested in mission trips tend to be sociologists or anthropologists of religion and missiologists who study Christian mission practices. These scholars document the history, scope, and diversity of short-term mission travel in North America. They also seek to understand relationships between mission trips and other religious practices – such as church attendance – or between mission trips and social factors such as charitable giving, civic engagement, solidarity, and socioeconomic status. While acknowledging the diversity of "mission trip" experiences, scholars have mainly examined its emergence and practice among Evangelical Christians. As I will illustrate, this close empirical focus has kept the theoretical interests of scholars similarly narrow.

The Emergence of Short-term Missions

Anthropologist Brian Howell's *Short Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* offers a succinct but comprehensive history of the emergence of short-term mission trips in North American Evangelical Christian circles. As he describes, mission trips emerged in the 1950s as a series of one-to two-year service trips designed by parachurch organizations to recruit young adults in their 20s to become lifelong missionaries or lifelong sponsors of missionary work.

From the 1960s to the early 1980s, the target audience became younger, trips became shorter, and the goals of travel expanded. Once a mission to transform the lives of those visited, short-term mission trips now explicitly included efforts to shape the

[7] Priest, *Effective Engagement*.

spiritual development of youth travelers. In the 1980s and 1990s, congregations began to plan their own short-term mission experiences, expanding their reach to travelers of all ages. As the number of organizations planning trips grew, the stated purposes of travel become even more diverse, including such goals as cross-cultural interaction and learning, service provision, and Christian identity development. The list of possible mission trip goals and activities is long, but its components tend to cohere around the idea that travel should transform the lives of both travelers and those they visit.[8]

Theorizing Transformation

The idea of transformation has driven most research on short-term mission trips. Studies test whether travel leads to changes in the travelers' spiritual life;[9] charitable giving;[10] church attendance;[11] cultural sensitivity and paternalism;[12] or volunteering or social justice advocacy work.[13] Results of these studies are mixed, not least because some lack methodological rigor. Recent peer-reviewed studies indicate that for young travelers at least, mission trip participation has a positive and long-lasting influence on rates of civic engagement.[14]

Studies have proposed several mechanisms through which transformation may be expected to occur. Practitioners argue that the "culture shock" of entering a new

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[8] Howell, *Short-term Mission*.
[9] Manitsas, "Developing Well-being"; Wilson, "Faith Maturity"; Tuttle, "Spiritual Growth and Maturity"; Beers, "Faith Development."
[10] Purvis, "Partnership in Cross-cultural Mission"; Probasco, "Giving Time, Not Money."
[11] Trinitapoli and Vaisey, "Transformative Religious Experience."
[12] Park, "Researching Short-term Missions and Paternalism"; Priest et al., "Researching the Short-term Mission Movement"; Blezein, "Cross-cultural Sensitivity."
[13] Farrell, "Global Discipleship"; Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "Youth Civic Engagement."
[14] Probasco, "Giving Time, Not Money"; Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "Youth Civic Engagement."

social environment and the emotional shock of witnessing stark poverty firsthand are catalysts for change. These amateur hypotheses have corollaries in social scientific theory. Anthropologist Victor Turner has written extensively on the subject of liminality during rituals or ceremonies. In a ritual to celebrate an adolescent's coming-of-age, for instance, the liminal stage is an in-between and ambiguous time and space where that person is no longer a child but not yet an adult. Liminal states in rituals are filled with transformative potential, changing social roles and/or shared symbols.[15] The disorienting experience of travel may create or simulate a liminal and thus potentially transformative experience.

As for the emotional shock of poverty, sociologist Randall Collins argues that social interactions generate *emotional energy* and that people actively seek opportunities to experience intense shared emotions – what his predecessor Emile Durkheim called "collective effervescence."[16] For Collins, the positive or negative valence of an emotion matters less than its intensity and whether or not that emotion is shared. For example, a period of intense but shared grief can generate social solidarity because people will take away shared symbols and meanings from the experience. Presumably, if travelers share the "shock" of witnessing poverty together, the emotional energy of such an experience might generate shared meanings and motivate future action.

Neither of these concepts is sufficient to explain claims of transformed travelers, however. Even if researchers found evidence of liminal states or emotional energy exchanges during short-term mission trips, mere presence does not guarantee change.

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[15] Turner, *Forest of Symbols*.
[16] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*; Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

Rituals fail all the time. Moreover, rituals succeed in unexpected ways. Liminality and emotional energy may create the conditions for change to be possible, but they cannot explain what kinds of changes to expect from travelers or hosts. To identify the practices that *do* explain such changes, I turn to the tools of cultural sociology.

Howell has already identified one crucial practice: constructing a guiding "narrative of short-term mission." He argues that travelers anticipate and identify transformations in themselves and their hosts because a particular shared story about travel guides their thinking. The idea that travel changes the traveler is common to many kinds of tourism and pilgrimage narratives. What distinguishes short-term missions from these other forms of travel, Howell argues, is that its guiding narrative involves going to a distant community, sharing one's faith, and seeing "an increase in Christian faithfulness among those to whom you have gone."[17] According to this narrative, travelers ought to view transformation in themselves or material aid provided to hosts as welcome but incidental outcomes of the trip experience. Having laid out the substance of Howell's narrative, I defer further discussion of the features and functions of narrative and other meaning-making practices to later in the chapter.

At this point, I want to emphasize that the priorities identified in Howell's narrative are not reflected in research topics. Few studies of short-term mission trips consider the effects of travel on hosts. Those that do tend to consider the efficiency or effectiveness of services such as healthcare or construction rather than the impact of religious or spiritual changes.[18] For instance, sociologist Kurt Ver Beek finds no

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[17] Howell, *Short-term Mission*, 59.
[18] McDonough and Peterson, *Create Missionaries*; Peterson and Peterson. *Worth the Time and Money*; Montgomery, "Short-term Medical Missions."

difference in the quality of construction services provided by U.S. versus local aid agencies in Honduras, though operating costs are astronomically higher to bring in U.S. volunteers.[19]

This smaller body of research responds to another important debate about short-term mission travel. Namely, if transformation is achieved, has that change been worth the economic and social costs of travel? Ver Beek measured economic costs directly and found the answer is clearly no; taking travel costs into account, building a house in Honduras cost mission teams an average of 15 times that which a local community development agency would spend.[20] Advocates for short-term mission trips argue that the spiritual benefits of travel are immeasurable. At the same time, they attempt to somehow weigh spiritual outcomes in cost-benefit analyses. As for the social costs or benefits of travel, relatively few studies exist. Those that do are plagued with the same challenges many development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face. Outcomes that can be measured are not always the best proxies for abstract goals such as "empowerment" or "spiritual growth."

Beyond Evangelicals

Most of the travelers I interviewed were familiar with the term "short-term mission trip." Some embraced the term, but many described themselves as breaking the mold of "missions" either because they had humanitarian rather than spiritual motives or because their religious convictions were decidedly *anti*-evangelistic. As I show in this

[19] Ver Beek, "House Construction in Honduras."
[20] Ibid.

dissertation, the motivations, worries, and actions of these non-Evangelical Christians bear little resemblance to the "narrative of mission" Howell has outlined. Nor would existing studies of personal transformations adequately measure some of their more corporate goals such as building strong cross-national relationships or reshaping a congregation's collective identity.

An alternate history of short-term mission travel might also more fully address questions of power and domination. Scholars who study short-term mission trips are well aware that these trips are marked by power and inequality. Yet the Evangelical Christians they study are better versed in deploying identities of their own "embattled minority" status than in grappling with their potential complicity in perpetuating hegemonic cultural and political discourses.[21] Howell's assessment is a common one within both scholarship and Evangelical Christian discussions. He recognizes dynamics of power and inequality at play during mission travel but avoids theoretical frameworks that would imply that power struggles are *inherent* to the practice. For example, he uses the term narrative rather than a more Foucaultian concept of discourse. He believes short-term mission trips have the potential to transcend such dynamics, *if* the way mission trips are planned, executed, and evaluated are significantly altered.[22]

He may well be right, and I hope he is. However, this optimism leaves out theoretical structures that can helpfully describe not what travel *might be* but what it currently is. In contrast, mainline Protestant and Catholic missionary histories are filled with stories and theories that address people's struggles to come to terms with a missionary history of complicity and confrontations with colonial social orders. In her

[21] Smith and Emerson, *Embattled and Thriving*.
[22] Howell, *Short-term Mission*.

book *Spirits of Protestantism,* anthropologist and historian Pamela Klassen documents the intersections of mission, medical science, and modernity in 20th century liberal Protestantism. The century began with a movement to convert people to faith in both Christianity and science. By the century's close, liberal Protestants developed a strong critique of the missionary enterprise and an expansive understanding of the connections between body, mind, and spirit. This view was steeped in the pluralistic synthesis of a variety of scientific and religious "healing" practices.[23] Any history of short-term mission trips from the perspective of liberal Protestantism would need to contend with its championing of the project of modernity, its embrace of pluralism, and its embarrassment and shame at past missionary zeal.

Writing such a history is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, a brief review of trends reveals an emergent practice and theology of travel that tends to emphasize relationship building alongside or in lieu of attention to changes in individuals. Howell reports that peace churches such as the Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, and Quakers began sending young adults on one- to two-year humanitarian and service deployments in the 1920s. In 1949, the United Methodist church began sending college graduates on short stays to support long-term missionaries; they mainly focused on medical and community development projects.[24]

In the 1980s, the trans-American solidarity movement captured the attention of many liberal Protestants, Catholics, peace churches, Jewish congregations, and others. North American congregations sent travelers to work in solidarity with Central

[23] Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism*.
[24] Priest, "Global Missions Involvement."

American revolutionaries or offered refugees sanctuary as they fled to Canada.[25] These solidarity tours were a direct response to perceived abuses of power in the global social order. They were informed by the philosophies of activists such as Paolo Freire, author of *A Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez.

In the mid-2000s, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) developed guidelines and best practices for international partnerships between Christian congregations and communities. These guidelines drew on a "theology of accompaniment," which Latino theologian Roberto Goizueta describes as a faith practice of "walking with the poor" in the spaces where they live.[26] Through this physical and metaphoric walk, people seek to nurture relationships to God and to one another. The ELCA guidelines were developed in conversation between North American practitioners and local leaders of church-related development programs around the globe.[27]

Rich empirical studies of religious engagement with questions of globalization, power, and development exist. Three strong contributions to the field include Sharon Nepstad's *Convictions of the Soul* on the Central American solidarity movement; Erica Bornstein's *The Spirit of Development* on Evangelical Christian development efforts in Zimbabwe; and theologian Robert Hunt's *The Gospel among the Nations,* an edited volume of primary sources documenting changing practices of inculturation, or efforts to teach Christian scriptures and precepts in ways responsive to local cultural contexts. While each of these texts touches on the existence of short-term mission travel, none

[25] Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*.
[26] Goizueta, *Cáminemos Con Jesús*.
[27] ELCA Global Mission Unit, *Accompaniment*.

has examined such travel at length or investigated the relationship between these brief encounters and a religious preoccupation with questions of power and globalization.

My study centers on Christian travelers whose faith prompts them to provide aid or to accompany the poor on a walk toward social justice. While motivated by their faith, most of the travelers in my study feel ambivalence about their role in the spiritual development of Nicaraguan hosts. In documenting their efforts to reach out to others without imposing their faith and to wrestle with questions of power and responsibility, this dissertation complements and expands the scope of existing research on short-term religious travel.

Volunteer Tourism

At its most basic level, volunteer tourism is the practice of combining travel and voluntary service. As with mission trips, the destination, duration, and particular activities of volunteer tourism vary. While mission trips largely focus on serving people in need, volunteer tourists might support a wildlife refuge, pursue environmental activism, or offer humanitarian relief. Whereas Howell distinguishes short-term mission trips from other kinds of travel, researchers studying volunteer tourism would likely consider religiously motivated humanitarian travel a subset of "volunteer tourism."

Tourism studies expert Stephen Wearing argues that volunteering and other forms of alternative tourism involve a philosophy of travel that takes issues of "development and sustainability" into account.[28] This philosophy manifests itself in a traveler's search for "authentic" interaction with locals, concern about environmental

[28] Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism*.

impact, desire for "equal exchange" of ideas, interest in mutual learning, and deference to local leadership in identifying volunteer projects. Similar goals were expressed by many of the travelers I interviewed from both organizations in my study.

In the late 1980s, a number of "alternative" categories of tourist activity emerged, including eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, and volunteer tourism.[29] The Current Population Survey estimates 3.7 million volunteers aged 16 and above traveled more than 120 miles within the U.S. to volunteer in 2007. Long-distance volunteers tend to be young, single, and childless, and tend to volunteer at high rates in their own communities.[30] Informal online polling in the mid-2000s puts the number of people traveling internationally to volunteer at between three and eleven percent of all travelers.[31] Qualitative studies find that typical volunteer tourists are young, well educated, and financially secure, and possess a sense of themselves as globally conscious, anti-imperialist, and/or aware of the social justice implications of the global political and economic orders.[32] These studies have largely focused on young adults from the U.K., Australia, and Europe who are taking a "gap year" before entering university.[33]

Two aspects of research on volunteer tourism that are most relevant to my own work are the discussion of the "tourist encounter" and the debate over tourist engagement with sustainable development initiatives. The idea that tourists may seek "authentic" encounters with locals is a long-standing subject of tourism research.

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[29] Callanan and Thomas, "Volunteer Tourism."
[30] *Long-distance Volunteering*.
[31] Clemmons, "Socially Desirable Response."
[32] McGehee and Santos, "Social Change"; Mowforth and Munt, *Tourism and Sustainability*; Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism*.
[33] Lyons et al., "Gap Year Volunteer Tourism"; Söderman and Snead, "Motivation of Gap Year Travellers."

Architect and cultural critic Dean MacCannell's seminal book *The Tourist* uses the language of microsociology to describe tourist encounters. Drawing on the dramaturgical theory of Erving Goffman, MacCannell describes encounters as rituals where local life worlds represent a "backstage." Locals deliberately plan presentations of self and local culture for tourists; these presentations represent "front stage" work. MacCannell argues that tourists who travel to discover a sense of self rather than to escape daily life seek "authentic" encounters. They are looking to get access to the backstage, which is imagined by tourists, locals, and many researchers to be closer to a glimpse at the "real" self of another.[34] MacCannell argues that locals produce rituals of "staged authenticity" by performing the backstage for travelers and thereby transforming it into a front stage encounter and a commodification of authenticity itself.[35]

Subsequent researchers have debated whether volunteer tourism avoids the commodification of authentic engagement or simply packages that commodification in a more palatable form. Anthropologist Mary Conran Mostafanezhad argues that volunteer travel involves the production of intimacy or of feelings of affection between travelers and hosts. In an empirical study of international volunteers, host community members, and NGO workers in Thailand, she observes that all three groups seek positive regard among interaction partners. She is not the only researcher to find that both travelers and local hosts report feelings of affection and friendship or a sense that the encounter

[34] To paraphrase a theological idea my research subjects might apply, an authentic encounter can be defined as one in which parties come to understand something of one another as subjects. Buber, *I and Thou*.
[35] MacCannell, *Tourist*.

was "genuine" and mutually beneficial.[36] However, NGO staff are also well aware that these experiences must be orchestrated to some extent in order to generate these positive feelings of attachment. Conran links her empirical observations to MacCannell's claim that people view intimacy as a way to access truth. He indicates that solidary encounters are seen as "more 'real' and morally superior to rationality and distance in social relationships."[37]

Conran's insights about the moral force of intimacy points to the other relevant issue in the field of volunteer tourism studies: the relationship between tourism and community development. Tourism research often positions leisure travel as a form of neo-colonialism that contributes to the ongoing underdevelopment of some communities and countries at the hands of consumers from more powerful ones. Some researchers argue that volunteer tourism can be a force for change, promoting either neoliberal economic development or a more radical vision for social transformation. These studies argue that the "awareness" and cross-cultural understanding that tourists hope to cultivate in interaction with hosts can be readily channeled into an activist identity and into practices that bring international funding and attention to local sustainable development projects.[38]

Conran and others are skeptical. They argue that the quest for intimacy and the construction of a traveler's sense of self supersede any efforts at sustained engagement

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[36] Sin, "Locals' Tales of Volunteer Tourism"; McIntosh and Zahra, "Cultural Encounter."
[37] MacCannell, *Tourist*, 94. As cited in Conran, "Intimacy in Volunteer Tourism."
[38] Wearing and Neil, "Self and Identity"; Spencer, "Lessons from Cuba"; Simpson, "'Doing Development'."

with questions about structural inequalities or social justice.[39] Conran bases her critique on queer and feminist readings of the use of personal stories in cultural politics. Personal stories can illustrate to great effect the impacts of structural inequality on individual lives. They also frame the conversation in terms of personal suffering rather than institutional structures. This emotional and subjective framing grants the narrator significant moral authority. Who better to assess personal experience than the person having an experience? This authority comes at the expense of rational or systematic critiques of the causes and consequences of the global social order. Conran argues that this approach normalizes the very neoliberal institutional structures that these stories are meant to destabilize. Her critique is particularly useful in the context of my own research because listening to and telling personal stories is a common practice travelers and organizations use in communicating the meaning of travel or the "right" and "wrong" ways to encounter people in need, Nicaraguans or otherwise.

Are intimacy and structural change competing or compatible social practices? Will the tendency to commodify and consume intimacy be a consistently more powerful force in volunteer tourism than collaboration on structural change movements? To date, empirical research tends to back up Conran's claims. The narratives of travelers consistently identify emotionally intimate encounters as the most meaningful aspect of the volunteer tourism experience. However, the organizations profiled in the existing literature appear to enthusiastically embrace the idea of intimacy as a positive force in travel experiences. This is true of only one of the organizations I study, Manos por Dios. The other, Partners in Solidarity, views the power of intimate connections as a force to

[39] Dalwai and Donegan, "Travellers to Global Citizens"; Singh, "Tourism and Development"; Higgins-Desbiolles and Russell-Mundine, "Absences in Volunteer Tourism."

be managed and made subject to a larger vision of structural change. Thus, my research provides the opportunity to examine empirically Conran's thesis in the context of an organization that respects but resists the power of intimacy.

Learning to Navigate Messy Interactions

Sociologists of culture argue that people have access to broad cultural *repertoires* that are made up of rules, concepts, habits, skills, styles, and scripts accumulated over a lifetime of immersion in a social milieu. Sociologists use various metaphors ("tinkering"[40] or "tool kits"[41]) to convey a theory of action wherein people apply available cultural resources to their specific circumstances. As people move across geographic regions or from one social setting to another, such as the workplace, family home, or congregation, they learn social norms for applying cultural knowledge or practices to their particular settings.

Face-to-face interactions have a performative and ritualistic quality as people put elements of their cultural repertoires to work. People perform roles, use and create symbolic meanings, follow cultural "scripts," and otherwise act in ways that make an interaction *make sense* in a particular shared social context. Whether informal or formal, rituals are important sites of meaning making. "Successful" rituals transform or enforce social roles, and they affirm social norms and a commitment to a shared vision of the moral or social order.[42] Failed rituals may simply fade away, may create disorder

[40] Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*.
[41] Swidler, "Culture in Action."
[42] Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order*.

or alienation in the social order, or as Anna Tsing's "friction" hypothesis argues, may create spaces where unanticipated and emergent cultural knowledge arises.

Rituals can fail in several ways. Participants may lack a shared focus of attention; they may lack a shared definition of their situation; and they may perform the wrong roles, words, or actions.[43] This list is only partial, but it points to a significant challenge and opportunity within face-to-face transnational aid: the repertoires of cultural knowledge that travelers, organizations, and hosts bring to their shared encounters are often mismatched.

People bring their existing repertoires of social roles, cultural symbols, and narratives to the experience of travel. However, they do not always agree about how to define their experience. Is it a mission trip or volunteer tourism? Is it evangelism, humanitarianism, or international development? They also disagree about which of their many prior experiences, interpretive lenses, and cultural meanings are appropriate to apply to their transnational interactions. How do they learn which frames, roles, actions, and words to use?

In this section, I identify the practices of meaning making that the organizations, travelers, and hosts I study used in crafting meaningful face-to-face encounters. These practices include both talk (including narratives, scripts, and group styles of communication) and extralinguistic features of interaction (including emotional energy, rhythms of timing, and attentiveness to setting). As I will argue, the two organizations I study use similar bundles of these practices to create divergent *orientations* toward transnational interaction. These orientations help people navigate the friction that

[43] Hüsken, *Rituals Go Wrong*.

arises when they enter an unfamiliar encounter. After laying out the kinds of practices used to navigate messy, friction-filled interactions, I will identify the main sources of friction that emerge in religious volunteer tourism.

Forms of Talk

As described above, anthropologist Brian Howell argues that the goals and practices of short-term mission travel can best be understood in terms of the formation and adoption of a *narrative of mission.* Narratives are powerful instruments in the creation and dissemination of cultural meanings. Telling and listening to stories helps people transform their diverse interests, experiences, and goals into shared, intelligible practices.[44] As storytellers assign characters credit or blame and put events into a sequence by generating a coherent plot, they not only describe what happened; they also make claims about how the world works or about how they think it ought to work.[45] They help situate experiences – especially ambiguous ones – within already-existing models for how life should be, or they create new models to account for unexpected or inexplicable events.[46] For example, romantic novels and movies often involve a "meet cute" story where a couple destined to fall in love meet for the first time in a particularly memorable (often quirky) way. In real life, couples tell similarly romantic stories about how they found "the one." Such stories reinforce the cultural institution of marriage as a lifelong bond between two individuals. Couples have other

[44] Polletta et al., "Sociology of Storytelling"; Franzosi, "Narrative Analysis."
[45] Orbuch, "People's Accounts Count."
[46] Rosenwald and Ochberg, *Storied Lives*; Wuthnow, *Poor Richard's Principle*.

stories that help them reconcile this "soul mate" perspective with the realities of the emotional labor of maintaining relationships as well as the reality of divorce.[47]

When it comes to religious volunteer travel, Howell wants to understand why people offer remarkably consistent claims about the purpose and effects of mission trips no matter the political, economic, or cultural dynamics of a destination – no matter if they themselves traveled or not. Howell's compelling answer is that they have learned a "narrative of mission" that guides their experiences and interpretations of travel. He gives the example of one young woman who spoke before travel of her desires to understand people in other countries and to learn about economic injustices. She was repeatedly redirected toward discussions of the gifts or talents she might offer her team as they set about their goal of serving God and the poor. Before travel, her team used templates to write request letters asking for donations to pay for the trip. During travel, the team talked about their experiences during daily reflection. After travel, team members had to present their experience to their congregation. At each step of the way, this traveler learned to reframe her experiences in the language of a narrative of mission, a narrative that was clearly provided by team leaders and teammates.

Howell's is not a deterministic argument. He does not subscribe to a postmodern claim that language alone constructs people's social reality. He leaves space for the power of extralinguistic experience, though he does not analyze such experiences directly. He also identifies divergence from and resistance to this metanarrative in the stories, questions, and stated goals of his research subjects. Still, his claim is that a single metanarrative of short-term mission travel exists and shapes experiences of

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[47] Swidler, *Talk of Love*.

travel in a powerful way even for those who seek alternate frames for making sense of travel.

My research expands Howell's insights in two ways. First, I suggest that Howell's metanarrative of short-term mission travel is, in fact, a narrative of *Evangelical Christian* mission trips. Howell carefully acknowledges his work is empirically grounded in an Evangelical history, theology, and praxis. He calls for more research on the travel practices of other traditions. In responding to that call, I find that the metanarrative he describes pervades public discussions of the concept of a mission trip. However, many of the people I interviewed used this metanarrative as a foil not a guide. Howell suggests that a narrative of mission sets religious travel apart from secular volunteer travel. I find, rather, that the defining narratives of non-Evangelical Christian travel overlap substantially with those of secular volunteer travel.

Second, I see narrative as one of several powerful meaning-making practices of religious volunteer tourism. A focus on narrative draws attention away from other important aspects of how people make meaning in social interactions. These related practices cohere to form a general orientation that travelers and hosts take toward both travel itself and to the interactions that take place during travel.

One such important practice is that of *social reflexivity*. In his book *Elusive Togetherness,* sociologist Paul Lichterman describes how groups try to build relationships across divisive categories such as race, class, and citizenship. He studies several middle-class Protestant congregations that volunteer and perform advocacy outreach among low-income communities. He finds that patterns of talk *within* the groups strongly hinder or facilitate their efforts to engage others outside the groups. One particularly fruitful form of talk is social reflexivity: groups talking "reflectively,

self-critically, about their relations with their wider social context - the people, groups, or institutions they see on their horizon."[48] Lichterman argues that talking about relationships matters for forming and maintaining those relationships. Active discussion about the meaning and nature of social ties makes it easier to "create or strengthen enduring civic bridges across a variety of social differences."[49]

In both mission trips and volunteer tourism, people travel in groups. These groups frequently make time to talk about their unfolding experiences and what they might mean. In the groups I studied, this kind of talk was incorporated into daily reflection time. Chapter 8 explains how the practice of reflexive talking during travel shaped post-trip claims travelers made about the meaning of religious volunteer tourism in their lives. While one organization practiced the kinds of social reflexivity Lichterman describes, the other practiced a more internally focused form of what I call personal reflexivity.

Extralinguistic Meaning in Interaction

Researchers who study cultural repertoires examine both the *content* of those repertoires – the rules, frames, styles, and so forth – and the *cues* that direct people's attention to how, when, and where to employ that content. In religious volunteer travel, interactions are brief and contact happens between people with vastly different socioeconomic and cultural resources, most of whom do not share a language. These circumstances make certain extralinguistic cues particularly central to meaning-making

[48] Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness*, 15.
[49] Ibid., 17.

efforts. Organizations that facilitate travel perform a crucial role in *directing attention* through the use of setting, emotion, and temporal rhythms.

Setting and emotion have long been understood as critical elements of social interaction. Sociologists have a tradition of putting social settings, not individuals, at the center of inquiry, from the differentiation of sacred and taboo spaces,[50] to the effects of total institutions,[51] to the ways urban spaces shape social interaction and mental states.[52] Storytelling and setting often work together to create meaning. For instance, certain kinds of talk are appropriate or inappropriate in certain settings.

For interaction theorist Randall Collins, all interaction is motivated by the desire for *emotional energy*. People move from interaction to interaction in search of emotionally satisfying encounters. Encounters where participants experience a shared emotion increase social solidarity, especially when that emotion is intensely felt. Encounters that disappoint either because of disparate emotional experiences or because emotional energy fizzles out can decrease solidarity. Collins argued that the pull or push of emotional energy can explain macrosocial structures such as social stratification.[53] One recent effort to refine this argument suggests people of higher socioeconomic status seek to maximize emotional energy while those of lower status seek to minimize its loss.[54] Advocates for short-term mission trips or volunteer travel often point to the emotional intensity of face-to-face contact as the force that generates transformations in those who travel. Collins' thesis suggests that one person's

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[50] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.
[51] Goffman, *Asylums*.
[52] Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life."
[53] Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.
[54] Summers Effler, "Micro Potential for Social Change."

experience of intense emotions is not a sufficient explanation for outcomes. A further necessity is to understand how the emotions emerged in interaction and whether and how those emotions were shared between interaction partners.

The brevity and structure of short-term religious humanitarian travel calls attention to another element of context: timing. The temporal rhythms of clocks and calendars are powerful structuring forces in daily life.[55] The disorientation that creates a sense of liminality in travelers is achieved in part from their removal from familiar temporal routines. Organizations that facilitate travel replace those familiar routines with their own temporal rhythms. Sociologist Erica Summers Effler writes about temporal constraints on social interaction. She compares interactions to a game of double-dutch jump rope. To do it right, you need not only skills but timing. You need to be in sync with the people turning the rope so that you know *when* to jump in.[56] In interactions, a person might have the right cultural tools to apply to a particular situation, but the timing might be off. The person might respond too slowly to changes in the interactional environment or might anticipate a brief, one-time encounter while the interaction partner expects to maintain a long-term bond.

The organizations I study use talk, timing, setting, and emotion together to *orient* travelers and hosts to a particular way of thinking about transnational interactions. Orientations shape the ways existing toolkits get used by setting the parameters by which people evaluate interactional success. Is this lunch experience a casual meal between friends or a first date? On a religious volunteer tourism trip, am I buying this soda because I am thirsty or because I want to support entrepreneurs in this

[55] Zerubavel, "Timetables and Scheduling."
[56] Summers Effler, "Ritual Theory."

impoverished community? Orientations flag certain situational contexts as relevant and others as irrelevant to a given interaction. They present a lens for thinking about the roles of interlocutors and goals for an encounter. Attention to these contexts, roles, and goals crafts an understanding of the setting, and the use of cultural resources such as habits or rules responds to that definition of one's setting.

Organizations orient people to which cultural tools are appropriate to use in a present interaction by showing them how much of the past and the future should be relevant to the interaction. People make future-oriented calculations about desirable outcomes and possible courses of action by thinking about the past. Which kinds of past experiences are relevant to a current interaction? Social forces shape people's thinking about the past by flagging only some aspects of the past as relevant and by making some possible futures appear more likely than others. This shaping is both temporal and spatial. It may include more or less past experience; it may anticipate a proximate or a long-term future. Similarly, social forces such as institutional norms may narrow or widen the scope of relevant past experience or possible future trajectories by constructing simplified or complex narrative understandings of one's current social position.

Friction in Humanitarian Aid Encounters

In Chapter 1, I claimed that religious volunteer travelers are aware that their face-to-face contact may help and/or harm the people they intend to aid. In this section, I unpack the social forces at work that inform their understanding of face-to-face aid as

a contested social practice. I also identify potential sources of conflict or of competing definitions of aid held by travelers and hosts.

Religious Models of Aid

Many theological and practical models exist for thinking about how Christians might care for the poor. Travelers sometimes distinguish between charity and justice as two Biblical values that can be applied to service to the poor. Practices such as giving to street beggars, serving food in soup kitchens, and donating clothing to Goodwill stores are charitable acts that offer short-term relief to suffering individuals. Religious congregations in the U.S. are experts at offering this kind of relief both at home and abroad.[57] They also frequently contribute to international development programs designed to not just relieve short-term suffering but to create pathways out of poverty. Congregations send missionaries abroad or donate to global organizations such as World Vision or Heifer, International. These organizations are experts at leveraging the compelling power of personal contact for the purposes of community-wide development work. Experimental research shows that donors are more generous when an appeal is based on a story of personal need rather than on statistics. In fact, the most effective appeal identifies a single needy individual and is unaccompanied by descriptions of the similar needs of her family, friends, or compatriots.[58]

At Heifer, International, donors can buy animals for poor families; at World Vision, they can send monthly remittances and letters to children. In both cases, the price tag

[57] See, for example, Wuthnow and Hodgkinson, *Faith and Philanthropy*.
[58] Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic, "Sympathy and Callousness."

for helping a specific person or family also includes funding for technical assistance and development programs for an entire community. For example, at World Vision Zimbabwe, all the needy children in a particular community will receive sponsors, and the local World Vision office controls contact between sponsors and aid recipients. The intention behind these policies is to prevent children from being singled out with excessive gifts, thereby fomenting jealousy or conflict in a community. The policies also protect both donors and sponsored children from solicitations for increased aid by desperate family members. Control is possible because donors remain anonymous and must select from a predetermined "menu" of potential recipients.[59] In volunteer travel, systems and anonymity are washed away. Chapter Five describes what happens when travelers meet living, breathing children and form emotional bonds that owe more to charisma, proximity, and personality than to carefully measured need or merit.

In addition to charity and development outreach, some congregations engage in social justice advocacy. These practices seek to transform social systems that cause poverty and underdevelopment in the world. They include political advocacy and more radical actions such as providing sanctuary to undocumented immigrants.[60]

Travelers are also influenced by Christian models for how they should *relate* to people living in poverty. The material and moral projects of aid provision create a unidirectional flow of resources from travelers to hosts. This flow reinforces a sense of hierarchical social ties in which those with more material wealth have more power and higher social status. Prosperity and moral worth have long been linked in Protestant

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[59] Bornstein, "Child Sponsorship, Evangelism, and Belonging in the Work of World Vision Zimbabwe."
[60] Yukich, *One Family Under God*.

ethics, from the Calvinist associations between work and piety to the "health and wealth" doctrine that God rewards faith with material blessings.[61]

However, there are also Christian teachings that emphasize the equality of all believers. Two recent theological approaches to transnational engagement with issues of poverty have emphasized the idea that both the rich and the poor have roles to play in teaching one another valuable lessons. One uses an Evangelical perspective on sin to define poverty holistically, as a series of relationships – with God, self, others, and the world – that are broken or out of balance. Authors Corbett and Fikkert argue that the materially rich are often spiritually poor and imagine that they can get by without reliance on God, while the materially poor are spiritually rich. When the two come together, they can mutually alleviate one another's poverty. Using a different set of theological principles, mainline and liberal Protestants have similarly advocated for "solidarity" or "accompaniment" actions that frame relations between materially rich and poor people as mutually beneficial. In both frameworks, a great deal of attention is paid to the amount of work it takes for materially rich people to curb their power and to create space for the materially poor to take leading roles in shared poverty alleviation efforts.

These are a few of the practices and outlooks that inform the motivations and interpretations of religious volunteer tourism experienced by the travelers that I interviewed. In Chapter Seven, I discuss in greater detail the religious resources Nicaraguan respondents used to make sense of their aid relationships with travelers.

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[61] Weber, *Spirit of Capitalism*; Coleman, *Charismatic Christianity*.

Humanitarianism, Development, and Personal Agency

As the research on volunteer tourism makes clear, travelers also have some exposure to ideas and practices in international development circles. In particular, they have been exposed to discourses about "human rights," "sustainable development," and "empowerment." These discourses make normative, universalized claims about the kinds of security people deserve and the kinds of prosperity they should strive for. These discourses also offer ideas about how to create pathways to security or prosperity and about how to measure success in humanitarian or development efforts.

These discourses direct attention to different kinds of social problems and their solutions. For instance, "human rights" are constructed as rights that inhere in individuals. While advocacy groups fight to protect or restore rights for classes of people, they also provide the means for aiding individuals, through the letter writing campaigns of organizations like Amnesty International, for example. In contrast, sustainable development discourses position people within social systems that are broken and in need of restoration or recalibration. According to this philosophy, for interventions to be "sustained" in the long-term they must not only impact individual people or families but also tackle social structures such as national economies and local governance structures.

One development concept that has trickled out into the language of religious volunteers is the idea of "empowering" local residents by building their capacity to make decisions for their families and communities and to take action toward their

chosen goals.[62] The hope is that by equipping local residents to plan and execute programs such as healthcare provision, water sanitation, and other social services, communities will continue to improve and programs will thrive even when an initial burst of international funding has run dry. Empowerment is an ambiguous and controversial goal, however. Measuring increased capacity or participation in development programs is challenging. Critics point out that organizations have begun to use measures of participation or empowerment as proxies for success rather than measuring changes in economic, physical, or mental wellbeing.[63]

The idea of empowerment resonates strongly with travelers from the U.S. who simultaneously hold self-sufficiency and care for others as signals of moral worth.[64] In the U.S., being unable to provide for your family prompts feelings of shame, culpability, and a lack of agency. International travelers apply these lenses to their encounters with the poor in other parts of the world even when locals do not view poverty in the same way.[65] Anthropologist Karen Mathers argues that the international humanitarian outreach by U.S. travelers in Africa turns people's suffering into an object of consumption that reinforces the generous identity of donors.[66] Fellow anthropologist Didier Fassin has argued that humanitarianism *requires* its recipients to become essentialized victims rather than agents of their own transformation.[67] International development efforts may not escape from the tendency to objectify or commodify the targets of development. They do, however, offer religious volunteer tourists language

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[62] Narayan, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*.
[63] See, e.g., Cornwall and Brock, "Development Policy."
[64] Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*; Walling, "Power of Receiving."
[65] Day-Vines, Barker, and Exum, "Diasporic Travel."
[66] Mathers, *Becoming American in Africa*.
[67] Fassin, *Bodies Remember*.

and practices designed to counter those trends. The language of empowerment helps travelers situate their brief trips within a larger scale and longer-term program of poverty alleviation.

For volunteer tourists, "authentic" face-to-face encounters and empowerment of locals are mutually constitutive actions. By meeting locals and listening to their needs in a face-to-face interaction, travelers expect they will better know how to provide resources, emotional support, and training that will help locals achieve their goals. This is one way travelers define empowerment: equipping locals to meet their own needs. At the same time, "authentic" face-to-face encounters are only possible when local hosts *choose* to allow travelers into a more intimate and more "real" part of their lives. Volunteer tourists view mass tourism encounters as objectifying hosts and creating a staged encounter for tourists' consumption. For an encounter to feel authentic, travelers must feel that hosts have asserted personal agency in allowing access to their "backstage" world. In travelers' minds, if not in practice, encounters and empowerment form a mutually reinforcing cycle wherein authentic encounters empower locals and empowered locals invite travelers into authentic encounters. In Chapter Seven, I discuss in greater detail how the Nicaraguans I interviewed constructed their own personal agency and sense of self-worth in response to aid encounters.

Intimacy, Inequality, and Materialism

Two additional insights are important for understanding why the personalization of aid raises so many warning flags for scholars and practitioners alike. Both address the relationships between emotional intimacy and economic exchange.

Both U.S. and Nicaraguan participants in my study referred to the cash and objects that they exchanged as "gifts," and both live in cultures where receiving a gift incurs relational and material debts. Anthropological theories describe gift exchanges as acts that tie people together through cycles of obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate with a gift.[68] Gifts are unique from other material transactions that may bind people or groups together. In market-based economic transactions, the moral and symbolic dimensions of exchange are muted. "Purely" economic transactions balance the scales of debt because two objects of equal value change hands more or less simultaneously. In contrast, gifts instill moral obligations by creating debts of gratitude. Simmel calls gratitude "the moral memory" of humanity. It is both a feeling of positive regard toward the giver and a force that impels recipients to give in turn.[69]

Inequality between gift exchange partners has generally been explained as having one of two effects on their social bond. First, inequality can damage or sever social bonds by creating debts that cannot be repaid. Second, coercive upward giving can create and maintain social hierarchies when more powerful parties extract gifts and promises from less powerful parties. In such cases, a balance of debt is maintained in favor of the resource-rich. The process is generally depicted as coercive or manipulative.[70] This approach to reciprocity fails to account for relationships between unequal partners in which the flow of gifts moves primarily from the resource-rich to the resource-poor, as in the case of humanitarian aid travel. Evidence from the U.S. suggests recipients who see aid as a gift feel solidarity with and increased trust toward

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[68] Mauss, *Gift*.
[69] Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude."
[70] Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift*.

the givers; their desire to "give back" to donors or to their community may increase prosocial behavior directed toward others.[71] Travelers I interviewed identified the action of Nicaraguans volunteering on behalf of other Nicaraguans in need as an example of the kinds of empowerment they hoped the emotional and material impacts of face-to-face encounters would inspire.

For organizations and travelers from the U.S., the emotional intensity of transnational encounters also raises worries about mingling affection and monetary support. Economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer argues that intimacy and economics have long been seen as "hostile worlds" or separate spheres of interaction with separate rules of behavior.[72] From a hostile worlds perspective, affectionate ties and economic exchange are mutually corrupting. Volunteer tourists and facilitating organizations mix affection and economic decision making all the time, but the fear of this mutual corruption seeps into their language and actions. Moreover, U.S.-based travelers and Nicaraguan hosts in my study often thought about and handled the mixing of affection and money in conflicting ways. For example, at one organization an English-fluent employee received an invitation to a professional translation workshop in the U.S. Rather than asking the organization for funding, he emailed some leaders of previous volunteer teams requesting monetary support. One pastor wrote a furious email to this translator's boss, accusing the employee of taking advantage of his ties to an international aid organization in order to solicit funds for personal gain. To the U.S. pastor, the personal request was out of bounds and violated the organization's mission and policies. For the translator, it made sense to ask his friends in the U.S. to support a

[71] Walling, "Power of Receiving."
[72] Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy*.

trip that would improve his ability to work with them in the future. Differences in the ways travelers and Nicaraguans thought about the proper handling of monetary aid complicated their ability to come to a shared understanding of the moral meaning of certain encounters.

Applying the Literature to the Case of Religious Volunteer Travel

The experience of face-to-face encounters in religious volunteer tourism involves both a desire to change lives for the better *and* the fear of the harm that change might cause. That harm may be imagined in terms of a trade-off between short and long-term goals or between individual and collective interventions. It may also be imagined in terms of a "hostile worlds" vision of the dangers of affection clouding one's judgment about how to distribute resources. In adjudicating between these concerns, travelers and local hosts are led by the organizations that facilitate travel.

The two organizations I study both offer individual-level and community-wide programmatic interventions, but they frame the value of those interventions in very different ways. They use contrasting orientations – or bundles of cultural practices – to direct the attention and behavior of travelers and hosts in cross-national interactions. One organization emphasizes the power of personal contact to lift people out of poverty. By directing attention to local spaces and proximate timeframes, this orientation makes particular encounters feel exceptional and capable of transcending durable inequalities. The other organization aims to redirect the energy and power of personal connections into collective partnerships and ambitions. This organization directs attention to long, colonial histories and broad social structures of inequality, and it situates encounters

within an unfolding trajectory of cross-national relationships that must be understood before they can be dismantled.

The next two chapters continue my discussion of preparation for travel. I first introduce the two organizations as well as the people and communities that I studied (Chapter 3), and then I explain how these two organizations teach travelers and hosts to direct their attention to either "episodic" or "embedded" views of interaction (Chapter 4). In Part Two, I examine how both moral dilemmas about individual or collective interventions and the tensions between affection and aid play out in interactions themselves. In Part Three, I examine how these orientations and interactions shape post-travel claims about the impacts of religious volunteer tourism on the lives of travelers.

Chapter Three: Entering the Field

I examine questions about cross-cultural interactions during religious humanitarian aid travel through a comparison of adult participants in two Nicaragua-based travel programs. My primary research methods include ethnographic observation and the analysis of narratives and explanatory accounts about travel elicited from in-depth interviewing. Two U.S.-based non-profit agencies, which I call *Manos por Dios* and Partners in Solidarity, allowed me to join nine teams on twelve separate trips to Nicaragua from April 2009 to March 2011. I also visited four Partners in Solidarity congregations to witness fundraisers and to learn how members who did not travel thought about their congregation's relationship to Nicaraguan communities. Before, during, and after travel, I conducted approximately 220 interviews with travelers, agency staff, and Nicaraguan residents of communities where *Manos por Dios* and Partners in Solidarity worked. This chapter explains my choice of field site and describes the communities, organizations, and individuals I study. I also address the advantages and limits of my unusual approach to fieldwork, where I embedded myself not in a geographic community but within transient teams of foreign tourists.

Why Nicaragua?

In her book *The Tourism Encounter,* anthropologist Florence Babb documents shifts over time in the motivations and actions of international visitors to Nicaragua. Here, I weave together her insights about leisure travel with the related history of volunteer tourism, which she does not directly address. In the 19th century, leisure

travel to Nicaragua centered on the adventure of traversing the continent through Nicaragua's diverse microclimates, from cloud forests to volcanic mountain ranges to breathtaking coastlines. Entrepreneurs from the U.S. came to Nicaragua for other reasons during this time. Since the 16th century, enterprising tradespeople had imagined a transcontinental canal in Central America. The existing rivers and lakes of Nicaragua were a logical site.

From the mid-1850s to the 1930s, Nicaragua's political instability and the U.S.'s desire for control over transcontinental trade fomented conflict between the two nations. Tensions escalated into military intervention in 1909 when Nicaragua's president ordered the execution of two U.S. mercenaries who participated in an armed revolt. The U.S. Marine Corps entered Nicaragua in 1910, supporting a conservative regime by creating and training a military force called *La Guardia Nacional* (the National Guard). Facing increasingly popular and effective guerilla resistance, the Marines left Nicaragua in 1933 in the hands of Anastasio Somoza, leader of La Guardia. That year, Somoza ordered the assassination of guerilla leader Augusto Sandino. Sandino's death and the withdrawal of the Marines temporarily quieted resistance, but Sandino became a martyr to many who disagreed with Somoza's policies. Forty years later, the Somozan dynastic dictatorship fell to a group called the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), or the "Sandinistas."

During the Somoza administration, Babb writes, international travelers were largely elites. They wrote travelogues that romanticized Nicaraguan life. They often conflated the folklore they heard with the contemporary lives of both the *campesinos* (peasant farmers) and the country's agribusiness and political elites. The character and purpose of travel changed dramatically with the Sandinista revolution of 1979. Activists

and artists flocked to support a country with a vision of social reform that was accompanied by rich cultural expressions of revolutionary sentiment, particularly in the form of public murals and a populist movement of poetry composition and recitation. The love of art and the Sandinistan political agenda drew the attention of famous visitors, such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Salmon Rushdie.

The Sandinista administration instituted sweeping socialist reforms. It confiscated lands owned by wealthy Somoza supporters, redistributing that land as state-owned farms or private co-operatives or even deeding it to individual campesinos. Cuban allies sent *brigadas* (brigades) of teachers to work with Nicaraguan compatriots on a nation-wide adult literacy campaign; UNESCO estimates that in 1980 over 9,500 Nicaraguan and international *brigadistas* (brigadiers) reduced illiteracy in the country by 37 percentage points.[1]

The Sandinistas' socialist policies and collaborations with Cuba and the Soviet Union troubled the U.S. government, which established an aggressive campaign of economic sanctions and financial and military support of a *Contra-revolución* or the "Contra" insurgency. The Contra war lasted a decade, ending with the Sandinistas' defeat not in battle but in a presidential election to an opponent supported by a coalition of eleven political parties and by millions in U.S. funding. During that time, Contra tactics were denounced by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Americas Watch, the U.S. government was successfully sued in international court for mining Nicaragua's harbors, and the Iran-Contra scandal revealed that Reagan's administration was covertly continuing to fund the Contras after

[1] Hanemann, *Nicaragua's Literacy Campaign*.

Congress voted against further support in 1984. The history and ramifications of this conflict for Nicaragua and for U.S. foreign relations is well documented. Political scientist Thomas W. Walker's *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle* is perhaps the most accessible scholarly account, while Reagan adviser Robert Kagan's *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* offers an insider's pro-U.S. perspective on the war.

Warfare inspired a new kind of international traveler: the solidarity tourist. Attracted to the revolutionary fervor of the Sandinistas or protesting the military interventions of the U.S., travelers came to Nicaragua to learn from and work side by side with the campesinos whose lives and livelihoods were threatened by war. An estimated 650 U.S. travelers volunteered during the coffee harvest season of 1983-1984.[2] By 1988, the Nicaraguan Committee on Solidarity with the People reported over 20,000 foreign "brigadistas" had come to Nicaragua to learn about the revolution, provide physical labor, and stand in solidarity with the Sandinistas.[3]

Progressive religious leaders joined activist organizations on solidarity tours in Nicaragua and throughout Central America during this period of region-wide political upheaval. The emotional resonance of these trips fueled the enthusiasm of U.S. religious leaders for high-risk activism. When the U.S. government would not grant Central Americans refugee status, some of these leaders provided illegal sanctuary or participated in an "underground railroad" transporting people to safety in Canada.[4] One

[2] Jones, *Brigadista*.
[3] Envío team, "International Solidarity on the Upswing."
[4] Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*.

of these religiously motivated brigadistas was Partners in Solidarity founder Sarah Mitchell.

Under Nicaragua's conservative and capitalist administrations of the 1990s, international tourism refocused on the breathtaking landscapes, a growing "ecotourism" industry, and a bourgeoning real estate market for ex-patriot retirees. As foreign aid decreased and fluctuating coffee prices contributed to the fragility of Nicaragua's largely agricultural economy, leaders looked to the tourism industry as the "salvation of the national economy."[5] Gradually, the revolutionary history became an important *commodity* or one more object to be consumed in Nicaragua's tourism industry. Babb estimates as many as 100,000 "*Sandalistas"* came to Nicaragua in the 1990s not only for adventure and relaxation but also to see the land of a recent revolutionary conflict.

Babb argues that an important instrument for stabilizing both politics and the economy in Nicaragua and in other nations in post-conflict transitions has been the cultural production of a tourist narrative of revolutionary history, complete with visits to historic sites. Babb notes that increasing revolutionary presence in tourism is often made "safer" for tourist consumption through temporal and symbolic distance. She points to the ubiquitous presence of the iconic profile of Ché Guevara as a way in which the Nicaraguan tourist industry celebrates revolution without celebrating a particularly Nicaraguan revolution. In my travels, I noticed tourist markets carried t-shirts, bracelets, and purses with the iconic Ché silhouette side by side with objects featuring the silhouette of Nicaraguan martyr Sandino pictured in a cowboy hat. While just as

[5] Babb, *Tourism Encounter*.

common as images of Ché in Nicaragua, the Sandino merchandise is less likely to resonate with tourists. On one Manos por Dios trip, I wore a Sandino t-shirt. A fellow traveler spied the cowboy hat and asked me if I was a big John Wayne fan.

As I traveled with both conservative and liberal U.S. tourists, I saw evidence of the flexibility that revolutionary commodities have as signifiers for tourists. Progressive Partners in Solidarity travelers often spoke of the Sandinistas as a group of ordinary citizens who took control of their own destinies. They tied this example of self-empowerment to the potential for local Nicaraguan citizens to take charge of local development initiatives today. In contrast, conservative travelers often overlooked the monuments and merchandise of revolutionary martyrs. However, some commented that the statues were examples of propaganda that could not successfully disguise the government's lack of meaningful support for the poor.

Aid for the poor is a primary motive of religious international travelers of both conservative and liberal political leanings. While the term "mission trip" evokes images of Christian conversion efforts, most international mission or religious volunteer trips involve travel to communities living in poverty where Christianity is already well established. By one estimate, of the 15 most popular mission trip destinations, nine are in Latin America, including the most popular destination, Mexico. Three (Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica) are in Central America.[6] Nicaragua is not one of the most popular destinations, but it is one of the poorest in the Americas. State corruption, warfare, and natural disasters have contributed to Nicaragua's high rates of poverty and

[6] Priest and Priest, "Short-term Mission and Service Learning."

to its dependence on foreign aid.[7] In 2005, 46 percent of Nicaraguans lived in poverty, with 15 percent living in extreme poverty.[8] The per capita GDP of Nicaragua was $1,131 in 2010, the midpoint of my 2-year study.[9] By this measure, Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and the poorest Spanish-speaking country. Organizations like Manos por Dios situate their actions as a response to this poverty and to the country's devastating natural disasters. For example, Manos por Dios was founded after a Catholic youth group traveled in 1998 to help with relief efforts after Hurricane Mitch displaced over 330,000 residents and caused over $1 billion (USD) in damage.[10]

The Scope of Volunteer Tourism in Nicaragua

The majority of international travelers to Nicaragua are emigrants returning for family visits. Of the remaining visitors, it is unclear what percentage are volunteer tourists, but industry and scholarly observers suggest it is a large group.[11] Volunteer groups often wear easily identifiable, brightly colored, matching shirts, which may cause observers to overestimate their numbers. I took nine round-trip flights to and from Nicaragua during my two years of research. On most of those flights or at the baggage claim in Managua, I made a game of counting clusters of same-colored t-shirts or polo shirts. On my first Manos por Dios trip, I wore a team t-shirt myself.[12]

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[7] World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
[8] World Bank, *Nicaragua Poverty Assessment*.
[9] United Nations, "National Accounts Main Aggregates Database."
[10] National Climatic Data Center, "Mitch."
[11] Fogarty, "Solidarity in Nicaragua"; Zapata et al., "Community-based Tourism."
[12] Since I flew to Nicaragua from a different part of the country than the team I joined, I was the only person on my flight in a Manos por Dios shirt. People looked at me differently when I wore the shirt

I usually encountered at least two or three sets of matching shirts each time I flew in or out of Managua. I also heard people in regular clothing discuss project goals or destinations in ways that made their volunteer status clear. On one flight, the white man in the seat behind me reassured his seat partner that he was *not* one of those religious people; rather, he owned a home on the southwestern coast and planned to surf, relax, and visit his son who taught English in a nearby community. Religious tourism has a palpable and ubiquitous presence onboard any flight enroute to or from Managua. In the context of the contemporary "tourist encounter" in Nicaragua, the visibility of religious humanitarian volunteers overshadows contemporary leisure tourism as well as the recent history of politically motivated travel.

For the Nicaraguans I interviewed, encounters with religious volunteer tourists were a mix of the familiar and the novel. Most had seen groups of short-term missionaries, Habitat for Humanity teams, and other volunteer tourist teams in the cities and towns near their homes. In Manos por Dios communities, teams arrived nearly every week. Yet many were experiencing the direct impact of teams — receiving aid or hosting teams in their homes — for the first time. During interviews, several confided to me that they had never spoken to a *gringa* (North American) at length before. Across communities and regions, they commonly referred to volunteer teams as *brigadas* rather than *misioneros* (missionaries). They clearly understood and almost universally approved of travelers' religious motivations. When they referred to volunteer tourists as *hermanos* (brothers and sisters), the phrase could be understood

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with its overtly Christian logo. Preferring anonymity, on future trips I waited until arrival in Managua to duck into a restroom and pull the shirt on over my clothes so that team members could identify me. I found about half of the Manos por Dios adult travelers I met chose not to wear the shirt on their flights. Matching shirts was not a practice of Partners in Solidarity teams.

to express a revolutionary solidarity or a Christian sentiment of unity that all are "brothers and sisters in Christ." Unlike in the U.S., in Nicaragua socialist and Christian commitments could comfortably coexist.

Research Design

Here, I describe the scope and methods of my two years of fieldwork. I first briefly describe the organizations I studied, the teams I traveled with, and the Nicaraguan communities I visited. I next describe the interviewees and my interview methods. After describing my methods of documenting my observations, I address the challenges and opportunities of situating myself within transient and traveling teams.

Organizations

Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity share several traits. Both were founded in the U.S. by religious professionals who had powerful experiences traveling in Nicaragua. Short-term travel is not an "add on" to their organizational missions. Instead, the infrastructure and programming of the two organizations grew out of a desire to connect groups in the U.S. with particular communities in Nicaragua. In addition to these short-term trips, each organization engages in a variety of development programs, including clean water, healthcare, education, housing, microfinance, and community enterprise. These programs are modeled after respected "best practices" in the field and therefore often closely resemble one another. Funding for these programs comes from private donors, and both organizations have elaborate, ongoing fundraising campaigns.

However, the two organizations diverge with respect to missions and to visions of the purpose of short-term religious travel. Manos por Dios focuses on service and personal transformation. It cycles high volumes of short-term travelers through five Nicaraguan communities to support its ongoing relief and development programs. In contrast, Partners in Solidarity uses what some mainline Protestant denominations describe as an "accompaniment" model of mission. The organization positions itself as a facilitator of long-term relationships in which Nicaraguan and U.S. partners each have leadership roles to play. It stresses transformation at the community level and implements many lessons and policies designed to counter imbalances in power between travelers and locals as well as uneven access to aid among local residents. Below, I sketch out the structure and scope of the two organizations. In the next chapter, I discuss in greater depth the ways each organization conveyed to travelers and Nicaraguans its history, mission, and vision of cross-cultural contact as well as the ways these practices shaped cross-national encounters.

Manos por Dios

Paul Gardner brought his Catholic youth group from the suburbs of Atlanta to Chinandega, Nicaragua, to help with Hurricane Mitch recovery in 1998. By June 1999, Paul founded Manos por Dios. Members of that youth group served as its first Board of Directors. Between 1999 and 2012, the agency provided over $37.5 million in monetary and in-kind donations to communities in northwestern Nicaragua. When I traveled in 2010, an office and warehouse in Georgia with a team of seven employees supported a Nicaraguan compound with forty field staff, including thirty Nicaraguans and ten young

adult missionaries from the U.S. In 2010, the organization's annual operating costs were an estimated $1.5 million (USD).

Manos por Dios was remarkably effective at recruiting enthusiastic and dedicated volunteers to serve as organization staff in Nicaragua. These volunteers were young, in their mid-20s. Each was responsible for raising about $7,000 to cover his or her own travel and living expenses as well as a small stipend for each year of service. Most planned to stay for 2-3 years, though a few expected to pursue graduate study in the U.S. before returning to development work abroad. They worked alongside Nicaraguan staff as peer colleagues and directed day-to-day operations for ongoing development projects, including water and sanitation, education, healthcare, nutrition, housing, microfinance, and community enterprise programs. By 2010, Manos por Dios had reached 87 Nicaraguan communities, though comprehensive programs were limited to five locations. In addition, the U.S. staff members facilitated a rotating corps of short-term volunteers, hosting over 1,000 visitors in 2011.

In practitioner discussions of the pros and cons of short-term mission trips, volunteers are typically viewed as supplementary to the central work of faith-based relief and development programs. They may assist with projects and be a great source for future funding, but they also compete for the attention and resources of long-term staff or missionaries. For Manos por Dios, short-term volunteers were its reason to exist. Travelers were both the objects and the vehicles of the organization's ministry. Manos por Dios teams included youth and school groups, adult groups, healthcare professionals such as doctors, dentists, and nurses, and teachers who facilitated skills development workshops for Nicaraguan teachers. The number of travelers during any week was limited only by infrastructure. When I traveled, the organization rented a

large house and transported teams on a donated school bus. During my visits, teams contributed labor toward a new Manos por Dios compound with plans for expanded storage, office, and dormitory space to accommodate up to 150 travelers each week.

Partners in Solidarity

While Manos por Dios aimed for growth, Partners in Solidarity was small by design. Its annual revenues were around $250,000, with approximately 200 volunteers traveling or helping at its Oklahoma office in the home of founder Sarah Mitchell. Sarah saw her organization's purpose as matching partner communities and nurturing them in a shared vision of relationship. This vision was grounded in four core values: mutuality, solidarity, sustainability, and collaboration. The stated intention was that Partners in Solidarity would instill the principles and know-how in both U.S. and Nicaraguan partners so that after five years, the organization was no longer necessary to sustain partnerships. The organization was founded in 2007, so I concluded my fieldwork before any community partnerships reached this five-year mark.

Between 2009 and 2011, the staff at Partners in Solidarity grew. Sarah's husband retired and began to work with her; neither took a salary for their "more than full time" efforts. An office manager was hired for fundraising and administrative tasks in the U.S. In Nicaragua, a Director of Women's projects and a translator were hired to supplement the work of the existing Director of Operations, who also translated for teams. The organization also contracted with a regular driver and other translators who served as effective cultural brokers who were familiar with the organization's mission.

Partners in Solidarity was a young organization, but its roots went back to Sarah Mitchell's advocacy work in the 1980s. An ordained minister, Sarah participated in the Central American solidarity movement. This work inspired her to travel to Nicaragua in 1985. There she witnessed hope and excitement in rural communities where literacy, healthcare, and land reform policies promised to transform the countryside. In the 1990s, she invited her congregation in Oklahoma to join her in building a partnership with a community in northwestern Nicaragua. The enterprise was so successful that she resigned as pastor in 2007 in order to establish Partners in Solidarity. While Partners in Solidarity was technically a secular organization, its mission was steeped in Sarah's theological commitments.

In Nicaragua, Partners in Solidarity worked with three communities. In the U.S., Partners in Solidarity worked with teams from congregations, colleges, seminaries, and other community groups. Teams from the U.S. could "explore" the idea of a partnership over several visits before deciding whether to commit to a five-year "covenant partnership." Both U.S. and Nicaraguan communities needed to agree to and sign a covenant in order to become partners. The covenant included a commitment to a good-faith effort at five years of partnership, including support for specific projects, annual travel from the U.S. to Nicaragua, annual travel from Nicaragua to the U.S. if possible, and ongoing community development support of $25 per partner group per month.

Organizational Access

Both organizations granted me broad access to their operations. I interviewed staff, witnessed "backstage" work such as staff meetings, and occasionally served as

sounding board or confidant. I also learned that in the context of short-term travel, very little "backstage" existed. Team facilitators like Sarah or Jen, the primary volunteer liaison at Manos por Dios, lived and worked with teams during an emotionally intense week filled with deliberate collective reflection. In many ways, their job was to model the emotional and intellectual journeys travelers were expected to take during the week.

At first, I thought organizational staff confided in me because of my unique position on the teams. I traveled far more often than other travelers. I also shared similar backgrounds. Sarah and I shared mutual acquaintances and belonged to the same religious denomination. The U.S. missionaries at Manos por Dios were mainly women who had recently graduated from college. As a woman not too much older, I became someone to talk with about graduate school, personal relationships, and future goals. As I continued to travel, however, I realized that both Sarah and these young women confided their hopes, worries, and aspirations to many travelers. Some of these worries were shared openly in reflection with the entire team. Others were confided to one or two sympathetic ears. Whether a factor of personality or of the atmosphere of intimacy cultivated through travel, staff widely performed a kind of confessional reflexivity that was both emotionally potent and revealing of their own ambivalence about particular organizational practices or teams.

Despite this general level of openness, I had very different levels of access to the executive directors of the two organizations. At Manos por Dios, executive director Paul and I were in Nicaragua together for about two weeks total. During most of that time, Paul was in demand every waking moment. My access to him was limited to group contexts. He gave presentations about the founding of the organization and its strategic

vision for the future. I observed him sharing his thoughts during evening reflection and relaxing and talking with team members on the porch late into the night. He checked in with me about the progress of my research. Our conversations were open and genuine but polite and professional. While I interviewed nine Manos por Dios staff, including six Nicaraguans, I never interviewed Paul personally.

In contrast, Sarah and I had mutual acquaintances before we met, including my mother-in-law. During trips, we often shared a hotel or dorm room. She consistently checked in about the progress of my research and wanted to know what kinds of books I was reading. We had many open-ended self-reflexive conversations about our respective work. For instance, she sometimes speculated about the best ways to balance travelers' charitable impulses with the "best practices" for development she had researched. I also raised open-ended questions that puzzled me, and our conversations often inspired written memos and theoretical speculation about my research. Thus, while both organizations were welcoming of my presence, my contact with Partners in Solidarity teams – and with Sarah in particular – involved more explicit discussion and reflection with travelers concerning the themes of my research.

Teams from the U.S.

From April 2009 through March 2011, I joined four Manos por Dios teams for seven- to ten-day trips. I took a one-week introductory tour with Partners in Solidarity and accompanied four Partners in Solidarity congregations on multiple seven- to ten-day trips over two years as they explored partnerships with three Nicaraguan communities. I also visited the four Partners in Solidarity congregations in the U.S. to

experience worship and fundraising for Nicaragua and to speak with non-traveling members of the congregation about their experiences learning about the Nicaragua partnerships. Similar visits to the home communities of Manos por Dios teams proved infeasible because these teams were largely ad hoc groups that typically included representatives from multiple congregations or wide-spread geographic regions. However, I conducted follow-up interviews with team members, which established that in contrast to Partners in Solidarity teams, little after-travel collective action such as fundraisers took place (as I elaborate in Chapter Eight).

Staff of Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity each helped me identify four teams to travel with. They introduced me to the local point people, to whom I explained my research objectives and from whom I asked permission to accompany the teams. These team leaders also provided me with a roster and contact information for their team members. I used these rosters to identify interview respondents. Seven of eight team leaders contacted agreed to participate in my study. When one leader from Manos por Dios failed to respond, the organization helped me find an alternate team. In later chapters, I describe specific teams in detail; here, I offer a brief overview.

Most Manos por Dios groups came from the southeastern U.S., particularly northern Georgia where Manos por Dios was founded. Typically, a group of eight to twelve people from one congregation met up with one or more additional teams onsite in Nicaragua. Three of the four teams I worked with took this form. These teams included a non-denominational megachurch in Ohio, a Presbyterian church in Georgia, and a group of neighbors and friends from North Carolina. The fourth team included teachers and artists providing professional training to Nicaraguan teachers and jewelry makers. On each trip, others joined the team, from family members of teammates or

missionary staff to repeat Manos por Dios volunteers traveling individually. The groups I traveled with ranged from 11 to 36 adult travelers.

Each team included travelers with varied religious beliefs and motivations for travel. Most were Protestant, both mainline and Evangelical, but I also met several Catholics, a Mormon, a Quaker, and a few atheists. Travelers in all groups participated actively in daily spiritual reflection, though several confided to me that they were troubled by the content. Some felt the program was not Biblical enough, while others were troubled by what they perceived as staff's immaturity and literalistic Christian faith. On the whole, I found the organization to be broadly welcoming of diverse viewpoints and gently but firmly discouraging of proselytizing. At the same time, its approach to Christian teaching was conservative, and staff made few efforts to adapt their language or spiritual reflection processes for groups of different ages or denominational backgrounds.

On a typical Partners in Solidarity trip, five to seven participants from a partner congregation would be accompanied by Sarah, a driver, a translator, and one to three other travelers who tag along. For instance, one week Sarah recruited a professional photographer with an interest in her work to provide photos for website and publicity materials. Another week, a pastor who designed and sewed religious vestments joined a group in order to work with Nicaraguan women who hoped to start a sewing cooperative. The smallest group comprised two travelers in addition to Sarah and myself; the largest comprised twelve, including eight travelers, Sarah, myself, and both of our spouses.

I traveled with two Partners in Solidarity teams from rural Kansas, one from suburban Oklahoma, and one from a large, urban congregation in Arizona. Two of these

congregations were affiliated with the United Church of Christ (UCC), one with the Disciples of Christ (DOC), and one with both denominations. The UCC and DOC are considered progressive mainline denominations that are non-creedal and non-hierarchical. While the national settings of both churches are notably liberal, each congregation has the authority to set its own standards for membership, and congregations vary in their political and religious makeup. In practice, the four congregations I studied were particularly progressive in the context of the conservative communities and states in which they were located.

Nicaraguan Communities

Manos por Dios was headquartered in the northwestern industrial city of Chinandega. From its urban base, it sent teams on day trips to surrounding communities, including a squatter village by the city dump and four agrarian communities where the organization was most deeply engaged. While one recently adopted site was a pre-existing community, the other three were built within the past ten years by foreign aid groups including religious and secular organizations. These transplanted communities often had more religious, political, and family diversity than a typical Nicaraguan village where a few large extended families could dominate the population. In the next chapter, I discuss Manos por Dios's flagship community, Villa Santa Inés, and the opportunities and challenges presented by the organization's decision to relocate refugees from Hurricane Mitch to a brand new site instead of one or more existing Nicaraguan communities.

On a typical trip, travelers toured multiple communities and contributed to a variety of ongoing programs at each location. This gave travelers a taste of the ambitious scope of the work of Manos por Dios, but as one experienced traveler pointed out, it also made it difficult to "crawl into the lives" of local residents. In contrast, the Nicaraguans I interviewed lived with a constant influx of foreign visitors at least thirty-two weeks each year. Reception of these visitors varied, but for the most part Nicaraguans welcomed travelers warmly, and some made particular friends of repeat travelers.

During my travels with Partners in Solidarity, the organization worked with three communities. The first was a sprawling forty-nine-square-mile *comarco* (district) near the northwestern city of León that had a nearly thirty-year history of hosting volunteer and solidarity tourists. During the 1970s, the community of *Comarco Este* drew theological and organizing insights from liberation theology. It established a "pastoral committee" to oversee spiritual, cultural, and economic development. Sarah first traveled to Comarco Este in the 1980s and "fell in love" with the people and their vision for social transformation. As of this writing (2013), the pastoral committee – an elected body with no official position in the Nicaraguan government – still organized community life. While its weekly meetings began with Catholic worship, its spiritual focus was far less central than its economic one. The committee worked with a wide variety of international organizations to secure funding for development projects. Sarah's organization did not provide the greatest dollar revenue in the community, but her vision of solidarity and shared power, her practice of attending pastoral meetings and consulting with local leadership, and her more than twenty years of history in the community conferred a special authority upon her.

Sarah became involved in two other communities – Aldeas Cafés and Sacuanjoche – through her long friendship with the executive director of a Nicaraguan community-organizing agency I call La Fundación. The new partner communities were in the central mountains of Nicaragua, home to the country's coffee industry. Both communities were established in the early 1990s during the initial years of post-Sandinistan capitalism. Until the mid-2000s, neither community had experience with international or domestic development groups; instead, ad hoc leaders included pastors of local Pentecostal churches, low-ranking Sandinistan volunteers, and the owners and managers of the local coffee plantations. When one plantation owner hired La Fundación to provide technical assistance and training, La Fundación invited Sarah to consider expanding her work. She did so, using Comarco Este as a model for what to do and what not to do in a new space. I describe Aldeas Cafés and Sacuanjoche in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 8.

Interviews

Travelers

I interviewed 82 adult travelers, including 52 from Manos por Dios and 30 from Partners in Solidarity. My goal was to interview each volunteer both before and after travel. Of the 82 respondents from the U.S., I interviewed 46 (about half) both before and after travel. Eighteen gave pre-travel interviews only and three of these ultimately did not travel due to health or family crises. In the other fifteen cases, multiple attempts to follow up were unsuccessful. During travel, I met several people who were not on the

pre-travel rosters I received from team leaders. Eighteen of these individuals provided post-travel interviews after meeting me in the field.

I conducted pre-travel phone interviews with 64 U.S. participants anywhere from one month to a few days before travel. I also interviewed a couple during the trip, bringing the total to 66. In these interviews, I established information about participants' experiences with international travel and cross-cultural contact as well as their opinions about issues such as foreign aid and the responsibilities of the U.S. government to respond to global crises. Pre-travel interviews lasted from 31 to 110 minutes. Most ran about one hour, with a mean length of fifty-one minutes.

I conducted an additional sixty-four follow-up interviews anywhere from three months to one year after travel. In the follow-up interviews, I asked respondents to reflect on their experiences of travel and their interactions with Nicaraguans. I asked them to compare and contrast U.S. residents and Nicaraguans in terms of national culture, racial identities, gender relations, and attitudes about wealth and poverty. Finally, I asked about post-travel changes that the trip may have inspired. I prompted them to speak about several of the most commonly cited forms of change, including their faith, relationships with family and friends, political views, economic practices, volunteering, and any other topics they found relevant. Post-travel interviews were typically slightly longer than pre-travel interviews and ran from thirty-two to one hundred seven minutes with a mean of fifty-six, though one interview was interrupted after seventeen minutes and not rescheduled.

I interviewed more men than women, which was consistent with Wuthnow's findings that slightly more men than women travel on international short-term mission

trips.[13] In the field, I found Manos por Dios teams had slightly more male travelers, while Partners in Solidarity teams had slightly more women. All but four of the respondents were non-Hispanic whites; most had little to no Spanish language skills. They ranged in age from 19-72, with an average age of 53. Overall, the respondents were less ethnically diverse, older, and more highly educated than mission trip participants in Wuthnow's survey.[14] The higher educational levels reflected both the large number of healthcare providers on these trips and the participation of several university professors with a team traveling to provide skills training for local teachers.

As described above, travelers were religiously diverse but mainly affiliated with Protestant congregations. Some travelers who participated in congregations at home insisted that they were not especially religious. Others who claimed no religious affiliation demonstrated through conversations in the field that they participated in various spiritual practices and communities not disclosed during interviews.

Why Adults?

Studies of volunteer tourism and mission trips generally focus on teens or college students, both because young people are the most common participants in travel and because the theme of "transformative" travel is tied up in an image of young adults seeking meaning and purpose in life. However, sociologist Robert Wuthnow finds two-thirds of adult international mission trip participants are over the age of thirty-

[13] Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*.
[14] Ibid.

five.[15] Adult travelers may be less open to dramatic transformations, but they have far more autonomy and resources than younger travelers. They can choose whether and where to travel and how to use their personal resources to support individuals or organizations in need. With increased discretionary income, the stakes and the potential rewards of travel are intensified. This overlooked population of travelers is an ideal subject for understanding how would-be caregivers weigh the emotional and economic consequences of their actions.

Nicaraguans

I interviewed eighty-one Nicaraguans individually or in groups of two to four. Fifty-two lived in communities where Manos por Dios operates, and twenty-nine lived in Partners in Solidarity partner communities. In these interviews, I asked about their daily lives, their hopes, the challenges facing their communities, and their experiences meeting foreigners. About half of the respondents were local leaders or participants in a particular aid program involving, for example, micro-loans, scholarships, or skills training for teachers or construction workers. The other half were selected by door-to-door visits in the community. One disadvantage of a travel-based ethnographic approach is that while I was able to build strong rapport with fellow travelers, my short time in each community made establishing similar levels of rapport and trust with Nicaraguan respondents more challenging. Beyond the amount of time spent with travelers, that rapport was no doubt influenced by the fact that I shared a country of origin, race, and educational background with most travelers and not most Nicaraguans.

[15] Ibid.

Nicaraguan respondents ranged in age from 16 to 89 (mean=38). They had more children on average than the U.S. travelers did (mean=3.0 vs. 1.7). About three-quarters of the Nicaraguan respondents were women. The gender skew in respondents had at least two sources. First, interviews with program beneficiaries largely involved women because both Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity targeted women for programs involving microloans, house deeds, and other benefits. Second, my door-to-door visits took place during daytime hours when men were likely to be away from home.

More than half of the Nicaraguan interviewees had less than an elementary school, or 6th grade, education. Only one had a college degree, as contrasted with more than three-quarters of the U.S. respondents. Few reported consistent employment. Most worked in agriculture, though I also interviewed security guards, cooks, entrepreneurs, and people who scoured the dump for recyclable plastics and metals. I have incomplete data about the religious identities of respondents, but they included Catholics, Evangelicals, and at least one avowed atheist.

Methodological and Ethical Considerations

My Spanish is what one translator called *utíl*, or functional but not fluent. Therefore, I had a translator present for almost all of the formal interviews with Nicaraguans. The translators were all in some way affiliated with either Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity as part-time staff or family members of staff. Initially, I was concerned using family or friends of staff as translators might make it difficult to learn people's private or negative thoughts about the organizations and their volunteers. I made the decision to use these translators for two reasons. First, I realized quickly that

having an unaffiliated translator would not help me appear any more "objective" to local residents. They clearly spoke to me as a foreign volunteer and a potential donor. In that context, having a fellow Nicaraguan present to translate helped me build rapport and opened more conversational doors.

Second, in Nicaragua as in other parts of Latin America, networking through family and friends for employment is not taboo; it is the norm. People in my network were most likely to refer me to siblings or cousins who were also working on an as-needed contract basis for most of the non-profits in the region. When the recommended family members had adequate if not always proficient translation skills, I offered them much needed if temporary employment. Doing so, I not only gained the trust of valuable informants, I acted in the spirit and mission of the organizations I studied.

Research conducted in translation presented significant but not insurmountable methodological and analytical challenges.[16] I used several tactics to respond to these challenges. First, my primary translator became a collaborator and informant on the methodologies of translation. Second, I also worked with five other translators with diverse training and styles to ensure that interview responses were not colored by a single person's interpretive lens. I recorded interviews to capture nuances of tone and word choice, which I could later analyze at leisure, sometimes consulting fluent colleagues. I also listened carefully for shared key terms or themes across interviews and communities. I focused more on broad ideas than on subtleties of word choice. Ultimately, I found the presence of a linguistic and cultural broker improved interview rapport, since the translator and interview subject could join together in explaining

[16] For a discussion of these challenges, see Ficklin and Jones, "Translation Practices in the Field."

unfamiliar terms or concepts to me. This was especially helpful with the sizeable minority of respondents who had never spoken with a foreign visitor before.

In conducting door-to-door interviews, I had to consider carefully ethical questions about consent and coercion. Very few people I approached said no to an interview even when they displayed visible signs of discomfort in the process. Many interviews began awkwardly. I had to evaluate whether this awkwardness should be attributed to communication styles, the presence of a translator, shyness, or duress. Local habits of hospitality made it difficult for women in particular to refuse to invite me into their homes to sit and talk. Once they assumed the role of host, they might find it rude not to answer questions, even potentially intrusive ones. Moreover, as a North American I might represent a potential sponsor for this person. For these reasons, I hesitated to probe deeply when the brevity of responses or tense body language did not ease early in the interview. For five people, I ended interviews within fifteen minutes due to their obvious discomfort and the reluctance of replies.

As a result, interviews with Nicaraguan respondents were typically much shorter than interviews with U.S. respondents, even taking into account time for the translation of more complex questions and responses. Most interviews lasted about a half hour (median=25 minutes; mean=36 minutes), though a few were much longer, stretching out over multiple meetings into 2 to 2 ½ hours of conversation.

Traveling Ethnography

Critiques that long-term missionaries level at short-term visitors might also be applied to itinerant ethnographers: they do not stay long enough to learn the culture or

rhythms of daily life. The methodological advantage of ethnography is in the observation of unfolding social worlds: to witness interactions in daily contexts; to document in rich detail the ways symbols are imbued with meaning; to connect the dots between the changing and contested identities people wear; to find unexpected meanings and patterns in the taken-for-granted. Traditionally, these goals are met through extended stays in a geographically delimited area in order to study a culture not one's own. Alternate approaches have been proposed for addressing social issues in a globalizing and digitally connected world. For instance, anthropologist George Marcus proposed that global or transnational processes can best be studied through a multi-sited ethnography that follows a social problem across geographically dispersed but interconnected people and flows of ideas, materials, and culture.[17]

Rather than a multi-sited ethnography, I pursued a travel-based ethnography. There are many ethnographic accounts of pilgrimage and travel, but most are written by ethnographers embedded in destination communities. Relatively few ethnographers travel with their research subjects. Katherine Mathers, a South African anthropologist at UC Berkeley, did just that for her dissertation on tourism and humanitarianism in South Africa. For Mathers, traveling with student visitors to South Africa allowed her to observe students *becoming* travelers, learning and inhabiting particular identities as "Americans in Africa," and carrying those identities into other parts of their lives when they came home.[18]

Mathers insists that her partial access to these subjects' lives does not make for an "incomplete" ethnography. Rather, shared travel made it possible to observe a social

[17] Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*.
[18] Mathers, *Becoming American in Africa*.

process that would otherwise be invisible. For the same reason, I chose to experience the transitions between home and away and between ordinary time and travel time alongside U.S. volunteers. Organizations have used these transitional moments to frame the experiences of volunteer travel, to construct certain kinds of identities, and to instill certain "rules" for interaction. In choosing to travel with the volunteers, I may have given up access to certain insights about the social worlds of Nicaraguan hosts. However, I am far better equipped to observe and understand how the act of travel itself shapes how travelers experience interactions with those Nicaraguans and how they interpret these transnational encounters.

Travel-based ethnography also presents the mechanical challenge of how to adequately capture field notes in an intensely packed 7-10 day experience. From the moment we woke up at dawn through the late evening conversations on the porch, each day was filled with juicy conversations, interactions, and dramatic reversals ripe for ethnographic analysis. The days were also filled with physical labor and enervating heat, with dust or humidity. On Partners in Solidarity trips, travelers were encouraged to journal daily before the intensity of each day could erase the important moments of the day before. Advice for travelers was equally relevant for an avid ethnographer hoping to capture not just highlights but textures and details of the rhythms of travel.

In the field, I used a combination of on-the-fly notes, recorded audio, and daily journaling to capture events. A slim digital recorder and pocket-sized notebook were my constant companions. I filled six notebooks and recorded four hundred forty-two hours of conversation, meetings, interactions, and field notes. Travelers often joked about the red recording light or asked about the capacity of the tiny instrument. (Approximately eighty hours, but I also transferred files nightly to my laptop.)

Nicaraguan children made a game of my recorder. While other travelers took pictures, I recorded children counting to ten, making animal noises, or singing songs, including a nine year old's spontaneous rendition of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" complete with beat boxing. Just as the children loved to see pictures of themselves on the tiny digital camera screens, they squealed in glee at hearing their voices played back to them.

I tried to write or record notes for at least an hour each night. During this time, I summarized the day's events, took note of any important facts or questions I had gathered during the day, and documented in detail at least one significant event. For the most part, I relied on the recorder and daily notes for facts or descriptions. I used the evening writing sessions to capture the emotional rhythms of the day, to record my personal reactions to experiences, or to speculate about the questions or interpretations raised by a particular event.

Each trip lasted one to three weeks and was usually followed by one week to three months at home. During the time between trips, I catalogued audio files and fleshed out my field notes. First I would expand my descriptive notes by consulting my notebooks and audio files. Then I would review these notes to produce more theoretical memos. Thus the process of analyzing field notes began in tandem with their creation. The space and time between trips allowed me to identify key questions, commonalities, or differences in my trips. These themes in turn informed the kinds of experiences I paid attention to or documented in depth during future trips. Ultimately, I found the rhythms of brief, intense travel followed by recovery, reflection, and research to be a physically taxing but effective and enriching technique for focusing my analytical and observational lenses.

Chapter Four: Orienting Volunteers

Organizations that facilitate religious volunteer tourism serve as a crucial link in cross-cultural contact. Staff of the facilitating organization mediate almost every cross-cultural interaction during a volunteer trip.[1] They broker encounters between travelers and hosts, interpreting not just words spoken but the supposed meaning and intentions behind words, gestures, and emotional displays. As a result, "making sense" of cross-cultural interactions for travelers is a process of understanding and adopting or rejecting the interpretive lenses of organizational staff. These lenses reflect both the explicit mission and goals of an organization and the implicit norms of interaction that have developed over time.

When thinking about how to orient travelers to these norms, organizations such as Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity face peculiar constraints. The window of opportunity to incorporate new members is both brief and encompassing. While groundwork about the organization's goals and practices can be laid in advance, staff have only a week with travelers to convince them to "catch" the organization's vision and to embody that vision in the way that staff think most appropriate. On the other hand, staff have 24/7 access to volunteers and control over their schedules during that week. How do organizations go about getting travelers to adopt their interpretations of cross-cultural interactions in such a short timeframe?

This chapter explains how orienting practices transmit not only rules of behavior but also styles of interaction that are attentive to either the immediacy and

[1]. Fogarty, "Solidarity in Nicaragua."

intensity of contact or to the ways transnational contact is embedded in a long, continuously unfolding history. By framing the travel experience itself as an exceptional, sacred moment set apart from daily life, Manos por Dios staff teach travelers to think of their cross-cultural interactions as equally special. This distinctiveness also untethers cross-national encounters from historical precedents and from calculations of long-term future consequences. In contrast, Partners in Solidarity frames travel as the establishment or renewal of international relationships by grounding face-to-face encounters in a larger political and economic history. Such grounding encourages travelers to think about the long-term impacts of their actions in the field. It can also cause them to second-guess their instincts during face-to-face encounters in the present.

Orientation activities are about directing people's focus. Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity use similar pedagogical tools to generate distinct orientations. I call these orientations "episodic" and "embedded" approaches to understanding the religious volunteer tourism experience. Staff communicate these orientations using rules, stories, emotion management, and symbolic places. These practices teach travelers how to imagine trips *work* or how trips transform lives, if they in fact do. They also teach travelers how to approach face-to-face encounters with Nicaraguans. The stories below illustrate ways the two groups communicate these ideas.

Manos por Dios, August 2009

Armed with a rusty shovel and a bucket caked with hardened cement, I stood with fifteen team members near a hole in the ground that would one day be an

elementary school. It was our first day of work, and anticipation was palpable. Dirt would fly that morning. Manos por Dios's executive director Paul gave our marching orders. He outlined our task, which was to level the foundation, and reminded us to stay hydrated. Most of his advice was about people not about shoveling strategies. He encouraged us to let the children who would soon appear help with the work, even if they worked more slowly. He urged us not to "pass up an opportunity to hang out with some of the people here.... The people come first, and then the work will come second."

Manos por Dios staff wanted travelers to make personal connections with community members. Throughout the week, they gave concrete suggestions for ways to engage Nicaraguans outside the construction zone. "Just hang out, or do whatever you feel is appropriate," Paul recommended. One day team members were challenged to find and pray for a Nicaraguan they did not know. Connecting with the children was usually easy. They seemed eager to work or play with attentive strangers, to giggle at travelers' broken Spanish, or to pose for digital cameras, rushing around to see themselves in the tiny screens. Team members shared stories of these touching moments at the end of each day. A man who gave an injured boy a piggyback ride to the clinic swore, "I will never forget Juan Carlos." A woman who worried about communicating her desire to pray for a stranger found it easy after she and a Spanish-fluent teammate were invited to tour a woman's home. She said, "Maria took time to speak with us and show her smiles and joy. So we prayed for her family and that was really cool."

The stories told at the end of the day usually involved memorable encounters in the course of a construction project or a consultation with the dentist at the health clinic. Travelers rarely spoke of visiting Nicaraguans in their homes. The vague

injunction to "spend time with the people" was rarely as compelling as the call to eke out one more backbreaking hour of labor. Especially for this group, which included mainly men in their 40s and 50s, making connections took a back seat to projects where results could be measured in aching shoulders and gallons of poured concrete. Repeatedly, Manos por Dios staff had to cajole teams into spending time with Nicaraguans without a bucket or a pickaxe in hand.

Partners in Solidarity, February 2010

Inge was taking her first religious international volunteering trip. She could not help comparing Nicaragua to her memories of working in Africa thirty years earlier. A Norwegian citizen, Inge met her U.S.-born husband during his time with the Peace Corps in central Africa. Inge appreciated his excitement about his second trip with Partners in Solidarity, but she was politely skeptical about the organization's goals. During our pre-travel interview, Inge confessed to me that she had argued with someone at her church about whether or not the team was actually "building relationships" with Nicaraguans. The church member said, "Well, your husband has gone back. And Connie is going to go back again. They already know people there. So they have built a relationship."

Inge told me, "It is not really truly possible to build a relationship with people there by going now and then." For her, a true relationship involved people who knew each other "so well that you can tell them when there's something you think they need to improve on.... in a true relationship, you are able to try to help another person to become their best." Inge worried that Nicaraguans would be overwhelmed by the wealth and power of U.S. travelers and would be overly deferential, which would

prevent deeper sharing from taking place. Her teammate Carl expressed similar concerns. "For me, a relationship is two-sided," he explained. He worried about the fact that the team from last year never heard from the Nicaraguans they met. Still he was willing to try again, saying, "I can see it being more two-sided as we go forward."

At our first dinner in Comarco Este, Inge brought up her concerns to Partners in Solidarity's director Sarah. She asked if Sarah felt that people could really build relationships in just a week. Sarah agreed that relationships do not happen in a week. Instead, she believed a week could be a chance to enter into an ongoing relationship. She asked the team to shift its thinking from a relationship of "you and me" to one of "we and we." She said,

> You all in a way represent every Partners in Solidarity group that has ever been here and every Partners in Solidarity group that will ever be here, as a corporate we. So the relationship is really invested in the "we" as a group that is associated with Partners in Solidarity and the community of Comarco Este rather than LiErin and Juan Marcos. And that's a very different way of thinking.

This concept appealed to Inge and her fellow travelers. One woman recalled the time two years ago that three Comarco Este residents came to the U.S. "It wasn't that I had a relationship with any one of those three," she explained, "but all of a sudden I had a relationship with that community." A man jokingly said, "It's a lot like frats or sororities." Sarah ran with the image and replied, "It is! If you're a Delta Delta, you're a Delta Delta forever and ever."

At our final reflection of the week, several travelers returned to this conversation. Inge had made an instant connection with the five- and six-year-old children who would be living in the house we built. She completely bought into the idea of relationship, though she grounded it in her personal relationship to these two children. Carl worried that his fears about one-way ties were justified, but he repeatedly

led the group in brainstorming conversations about ways to maintain communication. The man who humorously brought up fraternities confessed the comparison had been helpful. He returned to the metaphor often when thinking about ways a single week's encounter might be considered an authentic entrance into a larger, longer-term, and ongoing collective relationship between Partners in Solidarity partner communities in both countries.

Two Orientations toward Relationship

These stories highlight two distinct approaches to encouraging and defining cross-cultural interactions. Manos por Dios travelers were told to look for opportunities for one-on-one dialogue, to tell each other about emotionally resonant encounters, and to share their religious beliefs or practices. At the same time, Manos por Dios backed away from defining a collective experience for teams. Staff encouraged but did not insist that travelers meet Nicaraguans one on one. They suggested travelers could take ownership of each encounter by doing what "feels appropriate" in a given interaction. Manos por Dios reinforced these recommendations through rule giving, stories, and group reflection that narrowed the temporal, spatial, and relational attention of each traveler.

Stories that expressed group identity began with the founding of Manos por Dios in 1998. The emotional intensity that these stories evoked in staff reinforced a sense of immediacy and urgency in this relatively recent history. Many staff cried or choked up when telling these stories, despite the fact that most of them were told at least once a week. They were often told in places that were symbolic primarily to the work and

mission of Manos por Dios, such as the town dump and the village the organization founded. Group reflection reinforced an inward focus as leaders encouraged travelers to link their experiences of the day to thoughts about their faith, daily life, or personal relationships. Reflective talk explored the meaning of interactions in terms of self-knowledge and self-improvement. The "transformative" power of religious volunteerism was understood to reside in people's discovery of God's purpose for their lives and in their commitments to act on that knowledge in the future. Travelers learned to adopt a localized and personal view of volunteer travel as an isolated "episode" in one's life through a combination of staff's stories, inwardly directed reflection, and a habit of offering rules as action unfolded.

Partners in Solidarity, on the other hand, oriented travelers and Nicaraguans to think about their relationships as long-term, cross-national, collective, and civic. These ties were seen as "embedded" in specific, overlapping histories of contact between the identity groups to which participants belonged, including nations, communities, professions, and even genders. As the story about Inge and Bill illustrated, Partners in Solidarity's director, Sarah, had good reason to believe this kind of an orientation was counter-intuitive to most "Western" or "American" travelers.[2] Like Manos por Dios, Partners in Solidarity used rules, storytelling, and group reflection to reorient expectations of travelers temporally, spatially, and relationally.

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[2] Travelers regularly referred to themselves as Americans or critiqued a "Western" mode of thinking as inappropriate to the Nicaraguan context. Of course, both terms apply to Nicaraguans as much as to residents of the U.S. Terms of contrast such as "Western" and "non-Western" or "North" and "South" are largely both inadequate and inaccurate. Throughout this text, I try to limit my use of such broad comparative language to only those instances in which the terms are used in the field.

The stories of Partners in Solidarity *embedded* religious volunteer tourism in a long history, while reflective discussions looked forward to future interactions. Sarah could recite Nicaraguan history from pre-conquest to present day. It took her about a half hour, not counting questions and answers along the way. Her stories emphasized the ways that average Nicaraguans had been harmed by corrupt leaders and by the intervention of foreign governments. Histories narrated during the day were paired with evening reflection that encouraged specific and deliberate discussion of how the day's encounters might provide insights for future interactions. Instead of a spiritual mountaintop or moment of personal transformation, "transformation" on these trips was grounded in collective action. The volunteer tourism experience was framed as one of a long-standing series of interactions across two national groups, albeit one that could subtly shift the trajectory of that relationship away from an unjust past and toward a more just future.

Table 1 highlights several of the key differences in these two approaches to cross-cultural interaction.

Table 1: Characteristics of episodic and embedded interaction styles

Manos por Dios: Episodic	Partners in Solidarity: Embedded
Immediate/temporary	Lasting
Local	National/transnational
Personal	Collective
Kinship intimacy	Organic solidarity
Spiritual	Civic
Internal/individual change	Interpersonal/collective change

Orienting Practices

How do organizations such as Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity transmit these orientations to travelers or to Nicaraguans who approach these weeklong trips with their own experiences and expectations? Some of this transmission of knowledge happened in the weeks and months leading up to the trip. Travelers tended to learn about Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity from family, friends, or church leaders who admired these organizations. Prior to the decision to travel, travelers assessed whether or not the sponsoring agency would meet their interests or goals. This "assessment" often amounted to trusting the choices of the pastor or lay leader organizing their trip. Other travelers had heard stories about past trips by word of mouth, and some had checked out the websites of the agencies, scrutinizing mission statements, declarations of core values, and project updates.[3]

Travelers who came from a wide geographic territory typically had little exposure to organizational staff until they were on the ground in Nicaragua. Pre-travel meetings in the U.S. were run by a team member who took on logistical responsibilities. While travelers arrived in Nicaragua with a general sense of trust in the organization, the bulk of the work of orienting travelers to organizational culture and interaction norms took place on site. This work included giving rules, telling stories, and modeling appropriate behavior and emotional reactions. I discuss these three elements in this chapter. These practices happened both in structured meetings and during opportune "teachable moments" that cropped up over the course of the week. In Chapter Eight, I

[3] When explaining their reasons for travel in pre-travel interviews, Partners in Solidarity travelers stressed organizational principles and reputation more often than Manos por Dios travelers did. This distinction makes sense. Partners in Solidarity asked for a greater commitment from travelers and framed itself as an alternative to the "typical" mission trip. This framing and the greater commitment demanded suggest the selection pressures on potential Partners in Solidarity travelers are higher than for Manos por Dios travelers.

discuss the ways organizations cultivated reflective discussions that provided travelers with the opportunity to apply learned orientation styles to reflective discussions of each day's experiences.

Rules

Rules are a common way people learn.[4] For short-term volunteers who have just a week to learn the ropes, rules can be a clear and efficient means of communicating expectations about behavior. Travelers and Nicaraguans learned many rules or rules of thumb. Some were practical guidelines for getting by in a foreign country. Don't flush toilet paper. Don't drink the water. Other rules were about how to approach people. Physical affection including hugs and high fives was culturally appropriate. Giving money to beggars was inappropriate. Throughout the week, trip leaders repeated and elaborated on these guidelines as particular scenarios arose. They linked abstract rules to the practice of interaction.

The rules given during trip orientations differ from the largely implicit social rules discussed by theorists such as Bourdieu or Goffman.[5] Implicit rules are norms or habits. They are patterns of behavior that emerge over time as social interactions are engaged and repeated. People learn these norms by observing or participating in interactions and by being corrected or shunned when they violate boundaries. Observation or trial and error was how most Nicaraguans learned about organizational

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[4] A rules-driven approach to understanding how people learn is grounded most notably in the symbolic interactionist tradition within sociology, including authors such as Garfinkel, Berger, and Luckmann.

[5] See for example, Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*; Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*; Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.

expectations for their interactions with volunteer travelers. Since the travel destination was also their home, they had more than a week to learn how to interact. Through many encounters over time, they learned the norms of work with a particular mission agency.

In contrast, travelers usually spent only a week in the field. They brought with them a repertoire of habits and implicit social rules. They expected that some of their habits would conflict with the norms of the local community or with the organizational culture. Many travelers gave the example of cultural differences in greeting rituals. They pointed out that eye contact, smiling, and shaking hands were all signals of friendliness or respect in U.S. culture that could be offensive in other settings. (As it turns out, they were typical in Nicaragua as well.) Travelers and organization staff recognized that rules set down during religious volunteer travel were signals that some habit or implicit social rule that was appropriate in other settings was not appropriate for this setting.

Thus the orienting practice of giving rules during volunteer travel is a boundary-setting practice of deliberately reframing and restricting habitual social norms. The examples below demonstrate how Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity used rules to communicate expectations about social interaction. The examples also illustrate the limitations of rules that are designed to contradict ingrained habits of behavior. As religious studies professor Jeffrey Stout argues, implicit norms or habits precede codified rules, in that norms arise before they are reified into rules.[6] Norms are internalized while rules are perceived as coming from a source outside the self. Thus

[6] This view of the relationship between norms and rules developed by Stout in *Democracy and Tradition* is familiar to sociologists, but it contradicts the "social contract" paradigm of political theory that has pervaded the way much of modern society approaches the idea of social organization. In a social contract paradigm, individuals are perceived to be initially asocial units who agree to abide by a set of social rules, and patterns of normative behavior emerge from those rules. Stout argues that this mental model mischaracterizes the process whereby ethical decision-making takes place. Here, I extend that insight to apply to the practice of social interaction more generally.

norms or habits are also likely to take precedence in a conflict between a social norm and a social rule, barring strong sanctions for rule breaking.[7] The short timeframe of trips coupled with the lack enforcement mechanisms contribute to the weak influence of rules on the behavior of travelers.

To Facebook or not to Facebook?

As with most meetings at the *Casa Chele* (House of White People, a local nickname for the Manos por Dios headquarters), the gathering to go over house rules during our first evening in Nicaragua was a casual affair. The Manos por Dios volunteer coordinator was Jen, a former kindergarten teacher in her mid-twenties. She used her "teacher voice" to call stragglers to attention over the din of laughter, chatting, and thirty-five squeaky plastic chairs. Her rundown of house rules was more comedy routine than cautionary tale. When she reminded the team that plumbing in Nicaragua was not designed to handle paper and that toilet tissue should go in wastebaskets, a man across the circle joked: "Remember, folks, put the dirty side face down!" Another team member offered helpful tips for smooth wiping motions or efficient use of the paper. Other practical advice addressed dishwashing, leaving work shoes on the front porch, and conserving electricity.

Even on my first trip, I could tell which rules Jen thought would be the hardest for teams to follow. Rules such as "don't give away gifts" were counterintuitive. Other rules broke deeply ingrained personal habits such as the desire to follow a set daily

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[7]. This understanding of the distinction between internalized norms and external rules derives from Berger's work on the social construction of beliefs and values in Berger, *Sacred Canopy*; Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*.

schedule. When asking people to rethink instinctual habits for just a week, Manos por Dios staff connected that shift in behavior to some value or goal powerful enough to challenge the force of habit.

Gadgets that keep people in constant contact with their daily routines are an issue for organizations that facilitate travel. Part of the mystique of international travel can be disconnecting from the familiar. By leaving home, family, and familiar routines behind, people enter a kind of in-between or liminal space where reflection and personal transformation may occur. Mp3 players, smartphones, e-readers, and email bring those familiar settings much closer. For a one-week trip, I would carry a laptop for field notes, a smartcard reader for picture swapping, a USB flash drive for data backup, a digital tape recorder, a flip video camera and tripod, a still camera, a battery charger, an mp3 player, and a cell phone, the last of which I powered off until I returned stateside. Since I was going to work, not retreating from it, a reader might think I had a different relationship to technology than most travelers. Yet high-tech gadgets were common. Many teams had at least one other laptop on board, and two experienced filmmakers brought equipment for developing short documentary pieces. With smartphone data plans and local satellite-based internet, team members kept track of football scores, Haitian earthquake relief, the passing of “Obamacare,” the Libyan invasion, and the deaths of celebrities Michael Jackson and Elizabeth Taylor.

Jen invoked the spiritual benefits of temporarily unplugging from technology. She urged teams to "take this as a week of freedom, a week for the Lord to work on *just you*. If you absolutely need to send an email, [executive director] Paul will cave and let you use one. But try to let those things go. You'll find out God can work with you so much more if your whole heart is just here.” Jen framed travel as a spiritually freeing

experience that worked best if people temporarily disconnected from the objects and the relationships that made up their daily lives. She suggested that as much as travelers would miss loved ones, these relationships were part of the routines that constrained one's thinking and actions in daily life. She saw travel as a uniquely potent means of accessing a personal relationship with the divine, which was depicted as the most important relationship one can have. The request to unplug was a recommendation to temporarily narrow one's awareness to include only the people and places travelers saw that week. This isolation was one way to create a sense of the trip as a *liminal* or in-between space in which transformations of both the self and the social order might be possible. By stressing the value of liminal experience, Manos por Dios encouraged travelers to think about the meaning of travel as similarly isolated and exceptional.

Compliance with the rule to unplug depended largely on whether travelers saw religious travel as a retreat or as a space to recharge or recommit to lifestyle goals. The concept of religious volunteerism as retreat was one many travelers held before they connected with either Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity. One woman I spoke with had taken over fifteen trips in the past ten years. Though this was her first trip with Manos por Dios, she had a clear vision of all international religious volunteer travel as "turning opportunities" or as a chance to "get centered." She traveled often because she felt it was impossible to stay centered while steeped in her own culture, where life sped up and luxuries began to look like necessities.[8] Another Manos por Dios regular said that these trips helped him renew relationships with his wife, with his congregation, with God and Christ, and with the people in Nicaragua.

[8] I revisit this woman's story in Chapter Nine.

Despite an emphasis on "unplugging" as a spiritual discipline, many travelers sought out renewal without seeking out God. They spoke instead about de-stressing or about reminding themselves to consume less and to show more care for the environment. The “unplug” rule and its framing as a spiritual disciple were not the reasons some people avoided phones and even local newspapers while others checked baseball scores on their international cell phones or borrowed my laptop to keep on top of work email. Instead, participants’ behavior was shaped by already-existing attitudes about technology and about the value of travel as a retreat or a time "set apart."

This stance on technology contrasted with the practices of Partners in Solidarity. Team members used my laptop or Sarah's to send emails or post pictures and news to Facebook. Sarah offered her international cell phone for those wanting to check in with family members. When I emailed a mid-trip update to the pastor of my home church in the U.S., he forwarded the news to the whole congregation before I made it home. Sarah loved that story. She said, "I think it's really wonderful. I think there's something different about keeping people aware of what’s going on in Nicaragua when you're there in the middle of it, instead of just giving a report when you're all done." Facebook posts allowed people in local congregations who supported the trip with donations and prayer feel like part of the experience while it was still happening.

Trip blogs, Facebook posts, and other technologies helped Partners in Solidarity teams build energy and excitement among congregants at home. Contact was a reminder that travelers were representatives helping to build collective ties between an entire congregation and an entire Nicaraguan community. One team scheduled a Skype meeting with congregation members at a monthly potluck dinner back home. Though brief, the conversation was filled with laughter, energy, and shared prayer. A woman on

the traveling team later reflected, "We come here representing a whole lot of other people who would like to be here but can't be here. Just talking on Skype last night we heard all the people excited about us being here. It reminds me these trips are not about me. It's who we represent. They want to be generous too." In Partners in Solidarity's organizational culture, technology was one way to embed face-to-face interactions in an ongoing relationship between an entire congregation and a Nicaraguan community.

The Limits of Rules

Rules turn out to be a weak method for transmitting to travelers organizational styles of cross-national interaction.[9] They require repetition and reinforcement to be applied with the kind of fluidity that marks interactions as emotionally satisfying. The structure of religious volunteer travel limits such repetition. Even when travelers *want* guidance, the rhythms of travel make it difficult for them to follow new or counter-intuitive rules.

No matter the intention to comply, keeping rules in mind is a challenge during emotionally, physically, and intellectually taxing encounters. Communication between a U.S. traveler and a Nicaraguan is hard work. It is cognitively demanding to interpret body language, to read context cues in an unfamiliar setting, to translate the local dialect first into recognizable Spanish and then into more familiar English, and finally, to translate one's own thoughts back into functional Spanish. Emotion management is

[9] I should note this finding applies only to adult travelers. Manos por Dios staff have noticed that adults and teens respond differently to the imposition of rules. One U.S. staffer explained, "Adults are used to managing their own time. High school kids, other people manage their time for them. They bend to whatever. But with adult groups, learning to let someone else manage your time, especially another culture, is extremely difficult."

equally exhausting. Feelings of solidarity, warmth, and excitement vie with feelings of pity, frustration, and even shock as people learn about each other's lives. Rules create a whole new layer of emotional labor. People must also monitor feelings directed at their own compliance with rules, such as guilt for breaking the rules, anger at their arbitrariness, or doubt and confusion about the right thing to do. Rules of engagement that appear reasonable in the low-stakes environment of an evening team meeting may be no help at all in stressful face-to-face contact. For example, a rule not to give cash is hard to follow when an eight-year-old who has worked with the team all day confesses his family has nothing to eat that night.

Rhythms of Rule-Giving

When it comes to conveying a style of interaction, the content of rules is not the only relevant feature. Nor is rule compliance necessary for organizations to instill in travelers a particular orientation. When, where, and how rules are communicated also matter to the construction of a rhythm of successful social interactions. *How* and *when* rules are given teaches travelers how to respond to the temporal rhythms of the religious volunteer tourism experience.[10] The rhythms of daily life for travelers in Nicaragua are different from their rhythms at home. While schedules and goals exist for each day, flexibility is necessary. Flat tires, missing tools, and red tape halt forward momentum. Information flows through convoluted channels. Much is lost in translation, and answers to requests for factual information often depend on whom you ask. Men

[10] As discussed in Chapter Two, sociologist Erica Summers Effler emphasizes the importance of temporal rhythms in interaction ritual chains in her work.

and women often have different networks and sources of information, or community leaders have outdated census data.

Manos por Dios dealt with the changeability of trip schedules by urging teams, "Don't anticipate, just participate!" Staff promoted the idea that surprises were fun and adventurous. They delayed discussions of logistics until immediately prior to an activity. Instructions were often given out incrementally in the locations where they were most relevant. At the house we were reminded to wear closed-toed shoes and pack sunscreen. On the bus as we turned into the entrance to the dump, we were asked to stow away cameras to avoid making residents feel like objects. At the worksite we would stand in front of a foundation before being told that the day's task involved pouring concrete instead of digging up rocks. It was common to hear "I need a volunteer" and equally common for the reply "For what?" to go unanswered until after a volunteer was found.

Two groups found this lack of control and information increasingly grating as the week progressed. Several people complained to me or to teammates that Manos por Dios should save these patronizing techniques for teen groups. Certainly rhyming catchphrases and the mirth with which young staff members would spring such surprises discouraged travelers with weary bodies and thinning patience. When organizational staff and a team's internal leaders butted heads about their goals for the week, control over information became a sticking point. Deliberately flexible scheduling came across to one self-employed lawyer as a total lack of planning. Having seen Manos por Dios in action three times already, I suggested that the staff had a plan but was adjusting it when the team expressed disinterest in certain activities. The lawyer huffed, "This is no way to run a business." To him, flexible schedules were not a concession to

cultural difference or to environmental constraints but rather evidence of a complete lack of forethought.

In contrast, Sarah and Partners in Solidarity responded to the changeability of Nicaraguan life by bringing the backstage work of logistical planning to center stage. Teams participated in decisions as mundane as what time to have breakfast and as monumental as how to respond to communities caught up in cycles of human trafficking. My field notes were filled with mealtime conversations in which information and daily schedules were shared, updated, and revised. Something as seemingly straightforward as keeping track of where tools were stored and which donated tools survived from one year to the next turned out to be a dynamic and dismaying muddle of crossed wires, misinformation, and disinformation. Conversations between Sarah and Nicaraguan leaders took place in the presence of team members who complicated the puzzle by sharing what they thought they knew and what they thought could be done differently next time.

Partners in Solidarity's partnership model asked teams to commit to five years of travel. Five trips in five years could create the continuity necessary for rules to be repeated, revised, and internalized into habits. Partners transitioning from "exploring" relationships to committed "solidarity" relationships signed a covenant committing themselves to the principles of Partners in Solidarity. The organization taught teams how to live out that covenant by including team members in many kinds of face-to-face interactions, including fielding requests for aid, meeting with community organizers, and even disciplining contract staff who solicited personal aid. As the organization's representative, Sarah reacted in the moment then reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of her actions in later conversations with team members. She explained

how her actions aimed to deepen relationships or to demonstrate respect for Nicaraguan partners. She acknowledged mistakes and fretted over encounters that failed to live up to the principles of Partners in Solidarity.

Making and explaining decisions publicly created transparency and accountability within an organization that was essentially a one-woman show. By co-opting team members into this decision-making process and asking them to sign a covenant, Sarah gave teams a sense of ownership over their unfolding partnership. Responsibility for creating and enforcing rules of interaction was officially shared between Sarah, the team, and their Nicaraguan partners. In practice, team members and Nicaraguans alike deferred to Sarah to arbitrate their practical and ethical dilemmas whenever she was willing to share her opinion. One coordinator of a solidarity partner in its third year of relationship building described this deference as a show of confidence in Sarah's vision and long experience. "I may not always agree with her," he said. "I often don't. But I always, always respect her."

How Travelers Responded to Rhythms

"Nica Time" was a phrase used by teams with both organizations to describe how the rhythm of daily life in Nicaragua operated more slowly and with less concern about punctuality or clear, incremental schedules than travelers from the U.S. were used to. In practical guides to cross-cultural differences or mission travel, this difference is often referred to as a "time-oriented" vs. a "people-oriented" culture.[11] Travelers I interviewed also referred to down time between tasks as "hurry up and wait" time.

[11] Livermore, *Eyes Wide Open*.

Everyone seemed ready, but the team waited. No one was quite sure for what or whom they waited. The two organizations taught travelers how to handle Nica Time using differing pedagogical rhythms for giving and applying interaction rules.

Manos por Dios staff let people know Nica Time was a mission trip constant. It was an uncomfortable cultural difference to which travelers must adjust. While this knowledge helped in the abstract, it was cold comfort in specific interactions. My personal struggle with Nica Time happened on the only day I could interview families at the dump where Manos por Dios had a program to relocate squatters to environmentally safer communities. The program director who planned to escort me said he had a few things to do before we could head out. I began to get anxious after half an hour. I waited an hour more before going into the office to check up on my ride. I learned that the truck we needed for the muddy road to the dump was not back yet from a morning errand. The moment it was, we would go. It was much easier to wait for the next hour knowing the delay was not because I had been forgotten or because the staff were *charlando* (gossiping). It was one thing to know that Nica Time required patience. For me and for many travelers, that patience came more easily with some cultural information. The Manos por Dios staff were used to the routine of "hurry up and wait" and neither required nor provided such information. They saw flexibility as necessary, incuriously shrugging and saying "that's Nica Time!" whenever a delay arose.

Partners in Solidarity team members got equally frustrated with Nica Time. Perhaps following Sarah's example, they expressed that frustration not through complaints but through externalized moments of processing cultural difference. In my twelve trips to Nicaragua, I often came across travelers eager to put in as many physically taxing hours of labor as possible. While relationships might be theoretically

important to these travelers, their first measure of progress would always be rows of bricks laid or bags of cement mixed. As much as these travelers might enjoy sharing a beer at the cantina or learning about the family whose house we were building, down time was always the enemy. These moments seemed particularly difficult for the impatient lawyer mentioned above and as well as for Josh, a mild-mannered, experienced construction foreman whom I met on three trips with Partners in Solidarity. Josh never raised his voice, but he exhibited his restless energy through pacing and futzing, reorganizing the toolbox or setting up a more efficient watering station when down time threatened. One morning on our last trip together we had nothing to do at the worksite because the tools and our foreman were both still at the top of the hill by the dormitories. Josh told me:

> This is the part of Nica Time that drives me crazy. Ángel is sitting talking after the meal. I saw him load up his plate, and I asked him, "When you're done here can you bring us the tools?" He's probably sitting there talking. That socializing part of it – I need to understand about it because it's part of the culture. But I also have four people here not able to do anything because we don't have tools.

While no less frustrated than the lawyer above, Josh contextualized his frustration as a problem of clashing cultural norms. Ultimately he decided that compliance with local ways of working mattered more than his personal expertise even when those local practices drove him up the wall. This conclusion flowed at least in part from his experiences of hearing Sarah and fellow travelers discuss the importance of letting locals be in charge. Had Josh traveled with Manos por Dios, he would have heard similar messages about the importance of cultural sensitivity. These would have been mixed with many other messages, and he might not have linked that abstract idea to the specific incident that frustrated him. In an episodically oriented travel context, travelers often learned to pay attention only to those cues and messages being offered in close

proximity to a particular incident. From what I observed, the lawyer and his teammates certainly did not connect Nica Time to cultural sensitivity in the same way that Manos por Dios staff did. Rather, they responded to Nica Time as if it were a symptom to be treated – a symptom of the same cultural and social ills, such as a lack of entrepreneurial know-how, that accounted for Nicaragua's widespread poverty.

These two modes of sharing rules or information taught different ways of thinking about time during travel. The Manos por Dios approach dramatically shrank the temporal space between information and reaction and between giving a rule and asking people to put it into practice. Even when the same rules were repeated over the course of the week and even when those rules orbited around a single, coherent concept of cross-national relationships, the timing of rule giving created a sense of disjointedness. Trip time became an episodic mélange of experiences where each setting could be new and each encounter might have its own set of social rules.

Travelers experiencing such episodic interactions sensed that rules given moments before an encounter were less reliable guidelines than their own pre-existing habits of social interaction, which had been developed from previous encounters and personal judgment. The authority of personal experience over external rules was enhanced by the fact that at Manos por Dios the rule givers on staff were typically much younger than the travelers.

On the other hand, Partners in Solidarity travelers were often given far more information and responsibility than they really wanted. When travelers participated each day in making and revising plans, reviewing past mistakes, and anticipating future problems, they approached cross-national social interactions as requiring a similar degree of consideration. Events and interactions were shaped by a long, complex

history that included gratitude as well as distrust. Travelers also anticipated the ways various courses of action in the present would shape future interactions.

Orienting Stories

Social theorists affirm that listening to and telling stories helps to create and affirm collective identities, to motivate and justify action, and to teach institutional norms of behavior.[12] Storytelling has several advantages over giving rules as a practice of orienting groups to new situations. First, storytelling is an interactive, generative experience. While rules constrain action, stories encourage interaction. Speakers must read their audience to know how and when to tell a story most effectively. Audiences must interpret what they hear, and stories may have multiple interpretations. Stories often prompt listeners to share stories of their own, which may relate only tangentially to the original speaker's topic or intention. All of this engaging, interactive work gives storytellers and listeners the chance to practice and refine a group style of communication. Group members learn what kinds of stories and language are most effective at affirming a particular collective identity or at communicating institutional norms in ways that impact behavior. In a religious volunteer tourism setting, opportunities to learn and apply rules to interactions may often feel too brief, too sporadic, and too stressful. In contrast, there are plenty of structured and unstructured opportunities for telling stories about what did or might happen during cross-cultural encounters, and the absence of clear directives has its own merits.

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[12] For a comprehensive review of research on storytelling as a social practice, see Polletta et al., "Sociology of Storytelling."

Where rules operate best with clarity, ambiguity can strengthen a story's influence. Groups whose members have multiple, overlapping, often inconsistent identities and commitments often build solidarity or meet opposition most effectively when their communication is deliberately ambiguous.[13] Stories lend themselves to communicative ambiguity. They rely on metaphor, plot devices, and the situated contexts in which stories are told to convey meaning. Stories such as myths, fables, or religious parables that teach moral knowledge are especially likely to be open to multiple meanings and reinterpretation across time and social context. Participants in faith-based travel with Christian organizations are likely well versed in the pedagogical practice of listening to and unpacking the multivalent meanings of parables and other "teaching" stories.

Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity attuned listeners to either intimacy and immediacy or history and collective identity by using three elements of storytelling: plot, physical location, and emotional performance. *Plot* calls attention to the timing and sequence of relevant events. It indicates how far backward or forward in time listeners ought to look to make sense of the story. Telling stories in particular *locations* shapes expectations about the kinds of social contexts in which this story matters. The *emotions* performed or evoked during the recitation of a story also shape its reception. Emotional performances create a sense of closeness or distance, urgency or calmness. Each of these elements contributes to a story's ability to direct the attention of listeners. Below,

[13] Eisenberg (1984) identified the functional advantages of strategic ambiguity at a time when organizational theorists stressed transparency and clarity. Bender (2003) found volunteers at an AIDS-related charity spoke openly and easily about religious difference while avoiding talk about their personal experiences with HIV/AIDs. Open talk about such experiences would threaten the unspoken assumptions about motives and shared experience that formed the backbone of group solidarity and collective identity.

I explain how Manos por Dios stories generated a sense of immediacy and intimacy whether or not travelers bought into the explanations of poverty and transformation present in those stories. Partners in Solidarity stories were grounded in a model of long-term and collective social ties. Whether or not travelers accepted such a model, Partners in Solidarity cultivated in them a value of learning histories as a means of accessing the truth about people and social conditions.

Despair and Hope: Personalizing Poverty at Manos por Dios

Two locations were central to the stories that Manos por Dios staff told about the organization's identity and mission: the city dump and the community of Santa Inés. The two places symbolized the kinds of transformation that Manos por Dios staff hoped cross-national encounters would make possible in the lives of both Nicaraguans and U.S. travelers. The places represented before and after or "despair and hope," and the organizations intended for travelers touring the spaces to take home a belief that "hope conquers all."[14] The two communities also represented the origins and the future of Manos por Dios. The village by the dump, which had the oddly cheerful name Verjel (orchard), began as a refugee camp for people dislocated after Hurricane Mitch destroyed nearby communities in 1998. Relocating residents of the dump became the organization's flagship program. The organization then transformed a barren field into the vibrant community of Santa Inés, which became both the destination for former dump residents and an incubator for an ever-expanding menu of community development programs.

[14] Jen, addressing the October mission team during reflection the day we visited the dump.

Each week, Jen or Paul brought the team to the dump to tell stories that communicated the history, mission, and vision of Manos por Dios. Telling these stories in this place married narrative, emotion, and physical sensation in an effort to imprint the hearts of travelers with a moral lesson about poverty and redemption. In the following pages, I share my first experiences visiting Verjel and Santa Inés. I also unpack the ways that these stories used emotion and place to establish intimacy and immediacy, thereby promoting an episodic orientation toward short-term religious volunteer travel.

Touring Verjel, August 2009

Advocates of international service projects argue that being physically present in another space is an irreplaceable catalyst for self-reflection and personal growth. Nowhere is the power of presence more evident than in a place such as Verjel. The sights, smells, and sensations of walking through the dump can be difficult to translate into meaningful emotions or ideas, especially if one has been "rattled to the core" by the experience, as one visitor put it. Jen and Paul guided travelers through both the material reality of life in the dump and the emotional waters that they expected travelers were wading through. Their stories were less cohesive narratives and more a series of images and facts designed to channel travelers' experiences into a particular kind of emotional arc. This arc began with fear, anger, and misery and ended in joy and hope at Santa Inés.

In August 2009 this intentional shaping began with music. Manos por Dios staff made music a part of each day. They energized long bus rides by playing peppy pop music, but they also created a meditative atmosphere during devotional time through

the use of recorded contemporary Christian ballads. That morning, song lyrics described resting in one's fear. After the music faded, Paul warned, "You're going to wonder why in the heck people are where they are, why they're stuck there in the dump. Especially when we go to Santa Inés and you see the people who used to live in Verjel. People who said, 'Ok, I'm going to take a leap of faith'." Before setting foot on the bus, travelers were given an image of a turn from fear to hope.

At the dump entrance Paul repeated the story of Hurricane Mitch and the organization's early contact with 330 families that were given temporary shelter at Verjel. In 10 years Manos por Dios had relocated hundreds of families, but people always moved in to the dump to take their place. Others refused to leave or left for a few months or years only to return. Paul described his frustration with the many people who chose not to relocate. "They were scared," he explained. "And it was really hard to grasp why you wouldn't want to leave here." The group pondered these words while trekking silently across the dump.

There was little breeze that day. Columns of smoke rose eerily from a craggy landscape of trash that called to my mind the cursed land of Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings.* What I noticed most was not the stench of rotting food or the sting of acrid smoke but the colors. From the outskirts of the dump, the trash piles appeared a dull gray or brown. Up close, blurred streaks resolved into a cacophony of rusted wire, bits of banana peel, and plastic bags in white, tan, and blue. It was clear that each pile had been sifted through for recyclable metals, glass, or plastic. We passed a pile of bottle caps in a rainbow of colors on our left and a stack of mismatched shoes on our right. I stepped gingerly over an anemic squash plant, flowering green and yellow. It measured

about a foot across, and I wondered at how a squash came to thrive in the midst of decaying garbage and smoldering trash fires.

Folks picked their way across the spongy ground in twos or threes, trying not to openly stare at the forty or so Nicaraguans working in clusters around freshly delivered piles of trash. Paul informed us that the economic crises of 2008 could be felt even here. Workers used to get 240 Córdobas or $12 USD for a 100 pound bag of paper. They now received 40 Córdobas or about $2 USD. To fill that 100 pound bag a family might work for a week. I was distracted from Paul's lecture when I saw a teammate open a hard candy and drop the wrapper to the ground. *Why is he littering?* I thought indignantly. Then I recognized the absurdity of my thought. In a garbage bag or loose on the ground, the wrapper would end up here.

We came to a cliff of tightly packed garbage overlooking the water. A foaming tributary of bright green sewage was pumping out into a river already flowing with the waste of the city hospital several hundred yards upstream. Just downstream of the neon slush, six men waded and dove into the filthy water. They were culling the river bottom for any overlooked metals that may have settled into the silt.

At the river we paused to regroup. In post-travel interviews with Manos por Dios travelers, I heard the dump described as "stark and unsettling" and "an atomic wasteland." It was "disgusting and dreary and sad and smoky" and "like hell." Stopping by the river, I saw these reactions unfold for each traveler. Like me, some looked for understanding in information. We peppered Paul and Jen with questions. Does the river and its pollution go into the ocean? Yes. What kinds of health problems does the community face from the daily fires and dirty river? Mainly respiratory issues. Jen cited

a shocking though unverified 46 percent infant mortality rate in Verjel. Are theft and violence problems here? No. The problem here is apathy.

Other travelers withdrew. Some stood apart, body language suggesting a deeply internal focus with arms held close across the body, eyes gazing at the ground or miles away across the horizon. A few stood to the side chatting about the day's work, about goals, or about stories from home. Conversation might have been a way to disassociate from the surroundings. Many repeat travelers resisted the trip to the dump because it was acutely uncomfortable. The chatting travelers could also have been bored. Some repeat travelers resisted the dump visit because second and third impressions had less of an emotional impact. They would prefer to be working on projects.

After we stepped across a sluggish creek to enter Verjel, conversation picked up along with our pace. The variety and creativity of shelters captivated. A *champa*, a tent little more than garbage bags and sticks, leaned haphazardly next to a concrete building reinforced with razor wire and topped with a dish. A man next to me speculated, “Satellite TV or cellular reception?“ A repeat traveler who knew enough about Nicaraguan politics to instantly recognize President Ortega's image laughed and pointed to our left. A family had appropriated one of the ubiquitous Pepto Bismol-pink Ortega posters to fill a hole in their fence.

Giggles pierced the air. A girl in a turquoise, full-skirted dress ran barefoot down the road to greet us. Two boys were scooped up onto the backs of two thirty-something men. One boy urged his *toro* (bull) to go faster by kicking at his flanks. We turned the corner to find a school and playground with a soccer game in progress. Across the street, a local woman cooked food provided by a charitable organization so the students would have a midday meal. As we passed the school, Jen's tour guide spiel shifted into

angry tones. Her voice rose as she explained that Manos por Dios did not provide this kind of support in Verjel. Groups that did this work disgusted her because their provision of running water, electricity, and education made it easier for Nicaraguans to stay in a place of pollution and misery.

As many first-time visitors are, I was both shocked and confused. The community at Verjel was nothing like what I had anticipated. The physical infrastructure of the community was more permanent and extensive than I had imagined based on the staff's stories of aimless refugees. The dump teemed with energetic, friendly life. Even here, the care that residents had for their property was evident in the beautiful gardens and well-swept dirt floors. I had imagined faces of misery, drawn from sensationalist news stories, from gripping documentaries of African famines, and from the wide, affectless eyes of malnourished children filmed for child sponsorship advertisements. In the images of misery that I had anticipated, there was no place for the giggling children and the smiling gardeners I met in Verjel. Fellow travelers and I somehow had to reconcile what we were feeling and witnessing with what we thought we knew about how poverty was supposed to work. Manos por Dios staff facilitated this reconciliation work with another pilgrimage, this time to Santa Inés where we heard another story from the staff of Manos por Dios. Our team made its way back to the bus for the half-hour ride to our destination.

Santa Inés: God's Promise Fulfilled?

Our trip from Verjel to Santa Inés was also marked by music. Jen primed the team for the beauty of Santa Inés with a song about "the Lord loving us for the core of

our hearts." Jen compared the song to the attitudes of Nicaraguan aid recipients. She believed the people of Santa Inés loved the gringos who came with Manos por Dios not for what international visitors had to offer but "for being there and for being themselves." On four separate trips I saw Jen glow with enthusiasm each time she talked about the neighborhood she called "a place of such great hope" and "the melody to God's song."

The story of the founding of Santa Inés anchored the mythos of Manos por Dios's God-ordained community of hope and second chances. A U.S. patron who shared the organization's vision agreed to purchase land in order to create a new community for dump refugees. The patron had come to Nicaragua to view potential sites despite or perhaps in response to his grief over the recent death of his young daughter. She had succumbed to cancer after a failed bone marrow transplant. A patch of land in a region known as Barrio Cinco was the last stop of the day. Its considerable distance from the city and poor access to the main road made it an unlikely choice. Paul and the patron arrived there just in time to see the sun set behind the volcano on the horizon. "We have to buy this land," the man said with tears in his eyes. Paul was surprised until the man pulled a coin from his pocket. The coin had been given to his daughter by her anonymous bone marrow donor. The image on the back of the coin matched the view of the volcano and sunset perfectly. Paul instantly agreed to buy the land, and the community that they built there was named after the man's daughter Agnes or *Inés* in Spanish. To Jen and her coworkers, the story was a sign "that we were meant to be here and that this place was meant to thrive."

As was the case in many villages built by international groups, Santa Inés looked and felt like a gated community. A neighboring convent's high walls separated the

community from the busy road. Every home had a view of pristine volcanoes and gently rolling fields. Identical concrete block homes painted in cheerful contrasting pastels were set along carefully squared off streets and alleys. The precise grid of homes was a telltale sign of a village built by international organizations. Houses were numbered, and there were even shiny green street signs. It was the only place in Nicaragua outside a city center where I saw street signs. The community was laid out around a common area that boasted a six-classroom elementary school, a feeding center for students to receive daily lunches, a library, a basketball and soccer court, an informal baseball diamond, a playground, a spiritual center, a storage building, and a clinic with a pharmacy and multiple examining rooms. The community had clean water, benefited from scholarship and micro-loan programs, and hosted missionary-led after school programs. The services and amenities were comprehensive. Yet the uniformity of houses and yards felt unnatural to me, like a Disney theme park version of a Central American village. The people were warm, friendly, and happy to see the gringos. Strangers were greeted with smiles, while familiar faces triggered hugs, a volley of excited and rapid Spanish, and eager invitations to come see the family, tour the yard, and catch up on one another's lives.

Santa Inés had its share of problems. Gang activity was increasing as the first generation of boys raised there grew into young men with few employment prospects. Domestic violence, alcoholism, and incest existed despite efforts by Manos por Dios to create a safe environment for children. I was also troubled by the fact that Santa Inés had no internal leadership structure. It was the only Nicaraguan village I visited that did not have a Sandinista-sponsored Community Power Committee (CPC) or some other

formal leadership. Structure in the community came either from Manos por Dios itself, the gangs, or house churches, which were generally focused on internal issues.

In addition to the lack of leadership, the grounds for a shared community identity among residents were shakier than Manos por Dios staff believed. For example, Jen proudly told teams that everyone in Santa Inés came from the dump and that everyone knew everyone else. She was shocked to hear about a woman I visited who felt isolated because her husband worked in Costa Rica, and she did not know or talk to her neighbors. Jen would likely be more shocked to learn that about half of the women I interviewed in Santa Inés claimed never to have lived in the dump. The Manos por Dios story of redemption was not necessarily the story residents told about their neighborhood. Even the community name varied; several residents still referred to the area as Barrio Cinco, not Santa Inés. Despite these challenges, the beauty of Santa Inés and the warmth of the people who interacted with gringos there left a compelling first impression of a vibrant, thriving community. The impression of hope and joy that first-time visitors often felt was in sharp contrast to the shocking images and emotions left in wake of a visit to Verjel.

Orientation through Emotion Management

Manos por Dios staff shaped travelers' experiences of life in Verjel and Santa Inés by talking about and performing specific emotional responses. They laughed, cried, rolled their eyes, and flushed with anger or excitement. At the dump, Jen's rate of speech increased with her agitation as she described her jumbled emotional reactions to people who refused to leave. She raced between blame and pity, saying, "I wanted to

shake them. And I wanted to cry. And I wanted to shake myself." Director of Missions Hannah broke into tears mid-speech as she tried to explain how she felt on the day that she first saw the barren field that would one day be Santa Inés. She was surprised and apologetic at the intensity of her reaction to telling a story that she had told many times before. I noticed that the staff who worked the most closely with travelers displayed their emotions frequently, from pride in the organization's work to frustration with backsliding Nicaraguans to exhaustion at the frantic pace and petty demands of travelers. In contrast staff using the headquarters and dorms as office and dining space kept both emotional and physical distance between themselves and the travelers with whom they shared space. Volunteers sometimes described these staff as unfriendly or cold in comparison to the dynamism of the staff members in charge of orienting and managing mission teams.

Advocates of religious volunteer tourism expect travelers to experience intense, often cathartic emotions during travel. Part of the appeal of the ritual of travel is the incredible build-up of emotional energy – both positive and negative.[15] This emotional intensity is often associated with the presumed goal of personal or social transformation. Anthropologist Brian Howell has written that many mission trip practitioners assume that *going away* is its own mechanism for transformation. The idea is that having new experiences, seeing shocking poverty, and leaving familiar contexts will encourage in people emotional and meaningful transformations. As Howell

[15] Both Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, and Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains,* focus on the importance of emotional energy as an outcome of group rituals. Durkheim refers to "collective effervescence," while Collins distinguishes between group-directed solidarity and individually directed "emotional energy." Successful interactions are those that yield high levels of emotional energy. Collins does not distinguish between positive and negative energy or speculate on the effects of negative emotions on the production of feelings of solidarity or the desire of individuals to participate in future interactions.

does, I argue that if transformation is indeed an outcome of travel, it is not an automatic outcome but rather is achieved through deliberate construction on the part of trip leaders. My time with Manos por Dios and with Partners in Solidarity provided evidence that the *emotional responses* to travel that are imagined to contribute to such transformations are also socially constructed through the actions of agency staff.

Clearly Manos por Dios staff who facilitated over 30 trips a year and lived in Nicaragua full time were not displaying intense emotions as a natural consequence of exposure to eye-opening new experiences. Rather, the displays were part of a collectively constructed orientation toward the experiences of religious volunteer tourism. Whether or not travelers had the same emotional responses as the long-term staff did, witnessing that emotional dynamism created a sense of immediacy and intimacy to cross-national interactions. The kinds of emotions on display at Manos por Dios were what psychologist Theodore Kemper calls "consequent emotions" or the immediate reactions to an ongoing interaction.[16] Consequent emotions tend to be more intense and more transient than structural emotions, which tend to be fairly steady states in an ongoing relationship, such as empathy, solidarity, or security. On Manos por Dios trips, staff exhibited vivid emotional reactions even when recalling an experience from the past or when an experience was a familiar routine such as visiting the dump. Each encounter was wrapped up in the emotional immediacy of an unfolding event. This emotional immediacy underscored a tendency to view interactions as unique episodes rather than grounded in an ongoing relationship.

[16] Kemper, "Power and Status."

The immediacy of emotional displays is underscored by the intimacy of witnessing another person's vulnerability. In most settings where people spend time with near-strangers, intense emotional displays are highly inappropriate. In Manos por Dios and other volunteer tourism settings, sharing difficult emotions is an important mechanism of bonding within volunteer teams. In post-travel interviews, several Manos por Dios team members described feeling a connection to their team members that was linked to the perception that anyone who was not present could never fully understand what the team went through. This intimate closure enhanced group bonds and furthered the view of religious volunteer tourism as time set apart from everyday life. In contrast, the following section illustrates how stories told by Partners in Solidarity emphasized the more structural emotions of empathy and solidarity in order to support a message that history played a role in the experience of cross-national interaction.

The Past is Prologue: Partners in Solidarity

The stories that were told by Partners in Solidarity director Sarah also used physical space and emotional, evocative language to persuade travelers to associate particular meanings with their travel experiences. These stories emphasized the need to understand the past in order to shape the future. Partners in Solidarity teams valued storytelling of all kinds. Asking for and honoring life stories was a conscious practice carried out to build community within teams and with Nicaraguans. The purpose of this storytelling was to aid international partners in seeing one another as whole people and not mere stereotypes. While autobiographical histories were valued at any point in the process of the travel experience, orienting stories drew attention away from biography

toward a focus on national identities and civic engagement. The aim of the orienting stories was to provide information about Nicaragua's origins that would help explain the current social conditions of its citizens.

Stories of Nicaragua's history took many forms on Partners in Solidarity trips. The reflection journals prepared by Sarah included a three-page narrative tracing Nicaraguan history from "ancient" (pre-conquest) times to today. As an ordained minister, Sarah had a flair for distilling complex narratives. She could rattle off the histories of the country and the local community in factually dense but engaging narratives during our long drives from the airport to a partner community. Anecdotes also emerged organically over meals or at the work site during the course of the week.

Sarah's histories had clear heroes and villains. On one trip she had team members cheer each time she said the name Sandino, shout out revolutionary slogans when mentioning the FSLN, and boo or hiss whenever she mentioned dictator Somoza or the U.S. Marines. Her history of Nicaragua highlighted the repeated intervention of the U.S. government and U.S.-based industries and the negative roles these groups played in the civil warfare and underdevelopment of Nicaragua. Not all was doom and gloom, however. One way Sarah conveyed the importance of listening to the voices of Nicaraguan partners was by telling success stories about local self-determination in each partner community. These contrasting stories underscored Partners in Solidarity's philosophy that the best means for effecting social transformation was to foster civically engaged citizenship in the respective countries of volunteer teams and local aid recipients.

Whenever possible, Sarah took the team to a national or local landmark such as the Plaza de la Revolución in order to relate stories of Nicaragua's history. The Plaza

was the site of the July 19, 1979, Sandinistan Insurrection. A large photo at the entrance commemorated the moment when the Sandinistas flooded the streets to celebrate the overthrow of the Somozan dictatorship. In these places that matter more to Nicaraguans than to travelers, Sarah drew out vicarious emotions. Rather than making statements about how she felt or how the travelers ought to feel, she invited listeners to share empathy or solidarity with the emotional journeys of characters in her stories. The story in the next section is adapted from field notes taken during March 2010.

Plaza de la Revolución

On a clear hot morning in March, a group of volunteer tourists from Kansas gathered around the photograph of cheering Sandinistas. We were eleven in number, including seven team members, a Nicaraguan driver, a translator, Sarah, and me. On a previous trip Sarah had asked a Nicaraguan friend to tell his story of fighting for the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguans with us this day were too young to fight in the 1980s. Sarah instead asked those gathered to imagine themselves as part of the crowd in the photo.

> Imagine that you are a Nicaraguan who's been living under the dictator for 50-some years. All you've ever known is Somoza as dictator. He owns 70 percent of all the wealth in Nicaragua, and you are dirt poor. And his national guard is brutally oppressive, so you don't cross them or you end up dead, in jail, whatever. And then there's this little guerrilla army called the Sandinistas fighting in the mountains. And you know it's impossible for them to win, so you don't hold out much hope.

Sarah offered these images in low, smooth tones and without the sarcastic humor or anger that she sometimes used to tell histories. Folks stood in the circle with heads bowed. Some closed their eyes to better imagine themselves in another time and

place. Sarah went on to describe Somoza's open assassination of a popular media figure who had spoken out against corruption. "Like many," she told the group, "you decide to join the revolution" in the wake of this death. She outlined the next three years of intense fighting that stopped only when international pressure forced the U.S. to end its support of Somoza, and he fled the country. On July 19, 1979, Sandinista fighters celebrated in the square. The photo on display where the Kansas team stood in 2010 was taken in that place on that day. It was an emblem of "one of the few peasant revolutions in history that actually worked" Sarah concluded.

I was carried along by the story's momentum. I found myself watching the faces of other team members and wondering if they felt as I did. I sensed echoes of more vivid emotions, including anger at corruption, pride and triumph in victory, and trepidation about what might come next. Sarah brought the story to a close by asking, "What are your visions and dreams now? With the dictator gone, how do you feel?" I knew I was not the only team member caught up in the story because not everyone took this question to be rhetorical. An elementary school teacher quietly laughed. "You're going to get a slice of the pie," she suggested. Sarah replied, "Yeah. All those things you could possibly imagine feeling. That's what it meant."

Place as Interpretive Anchor

Sarah elicited empathy for Nicaraguan *campesinos* (peasant farmers) by using evocative language and physical locations to get travelers to put themselves in the shoes of the campesinos. The plaza where we stood was sacred space for Sarah. The photograph of the Sandinistas provided a focal point, and gathering teams around the

photograph lent ceremony and legitimacy to the recitation of a very different version of the Sandinista revolution than most U.S. citizens have learned.

More importantly, the plaza was a tangible symbol of national identity for many Nicaraguans. Natural disasters, war, and changing governments have repeatedly transformed the plaza's landscape. In the 1990s, President Aleman spent a half-million dollars to transform the plaza into a park with an elaborate fountain in the center that included a light show synchronized to music. The new layout prevented large crowds from gathering in the plaza to rally in support of the then-ousted Sandinista party or to celebrate the anniversary of the Insurrection. When the Sandinistas returned to power in 2007, they razed the park and restored the plaza to a functional space for crowds to gather. When this volunteer team visited in 2010, the square itself was paved over and looked to me like an abandoned parking lot with grass growing from cracks and potholes. I also saw enormous propaganda banners supporting Daniel Ortega and the current Sandinista administration. Each year on the anniversary of the Insurrection, thousands gathered there to celebrate.

Travel to nationally significant sites widened the temporal and relational focus of travelers. Manos por Dios stories were told in places significant mainly to the organization, its participants, and its beneficiaries. Partners in Solidarity stories told a history of international conflict in the places where that history unfolded. As Sarah described the U.S. government's role in colluding with and enabling Somoza and post-revolutionary leaders, travelers were viscerally reminded that the history of these revolutionaries was one that they shared. Most Partners in Solidarity travelers remembered the Iran-Contra affair. They knew enough about Central America in the 1980s to suspect that some of what they knew was misinformation or disinformation.

Some travelers participated in the Central American solidarity movement or had friends who did so. For these participants, the idea of solidarity was grounded in left-leaning politics and a critique of the U.S. government. Solidarity with Nicaraguans was one way to remind themselves of the ways that U.S. citizens had been complicit in their nation's foreign policy decisions and to affirm their commitment to oppose similar policies in the future.[17]

For a few travelers who were at least peripherally aware of anti-war activism in the 1980s, hearing the familiar language of solidarity in the place where revolution took place could be a light bulb moment of realization. One woman told me that she had spent a lot of time during her week in Nicaragua thinking about a friend she had not spoken with in fifteen years. This friend was "very active, very political" in the 1980s, and solidarity was her "buzzword." The traveler told me, "Intellectually, I absolutely understood what she was talking about." After spending a week in Nicaragua, walking on a land torn by revolution and talking with the people who experienced it directly, she said that she had finally internalized this intellectual concept at a visceral level. "I really get it now," she explained. Hearing these stories on the land where they happened and at the site of national monuments and sacred symbols created a focal point for the energy of solidarity that these stories generated.

Though genuine, the emotions evoked by a photograph and a meditative reflection on the revolutionary experience paled in comparison to the emotions

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[17]A handful of travelers from both organizations express a desire to be "ambassadors": to show people in other parts of the world that Americans are all right. Manos por Dios ambassadors were political and social conservatives; they tended to set themselves up as models of decency and decorum in contrast to the media's MTV and Hollywood depictions of U.S. culture. Partners in Solidarity ambassadors wanted to show Nicaraguans that U.S. citizens were good people who often disagreed with the harmful decisions of their government.

travelers felt while listening to an elderly Nicaraguan woman tearfully sharing stories about the deaths of her sons in the war. Similarly, knowing a space was historically significant did not have the same emotional impact as sharing that space with Nicaraguan nationals. Partners in Solidarity teams conducted their own small rituals at the Plaza. The team that was in country for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Insurrection on July 19, 2009, thought better than to try to join the crowds in the Plaza that day.

The limits of this vicarious form of solidarity were not necessarily a problem for Partners in Solidarity partnerships. The "core values" statement of Partners in Solidarity suggested that there *should* be limits on the extent to which travelers identified with Nicaraguans. Sarah warned teams that one danger in empathy was that travelers "start to dream our dreams for Nicaraguans" instead of "helping them make their dreams reality." In other words, over-identification with Nicaraguans could cause travelers to assume that their own visions for improvement were just as valid as those of Nicaraguans. To Partners in Solidarity, this was bad development strategy. It ignored the core value of "mutuality" in which respect for the unique contribution of each partner should be demonstrated by working with leadership structures at the local level to identify local needs.

Visiting the significant landmarks of another nation reminded travelers that in order to understand their role in partnering with Nicaraguan communities, they needed to remember they were guests and allies rather than community members. The importance of finding their own place in the partnership was driven home when those national landmarks included anti-U.S. language or imagery. Telling stories about national history in a place marked publicly as a monument to that history was a tangible

reminder that transnational encounters were marked by multiple social roles. People met not only as friends or fellow Christians but also as citizens of two countries with an antagonistic history.[18] Standing on ground marked by war, travelers were reminded that the week's experiences were shaped by previous encounters and that the day's interactions would leave their marks on the futures of both partner communities.

Orienting Nicaraguans

There has long been a disparity in the training and support offered to travelers and to local recipients of aid.[19] Before closing this chapter, I want to briefly address orientation practices aimed at Nicaraguans. These practices focused on defining appropriate behaviors for interacting with volunteers rather than on situating the relationship of travel to ordinary life. Humanitarian aid projects were ongoing and took place in the home settings of Nicaraguans. "Trip time" was not clearly distinct from ordinary time, even when visits from foreigners accelerated construction and program activity and fostered exciting interactions.

The orientation of Nicaraguans by Manos por Dios was local and personal in that Nicaraguans were oriented to the rules of specific aid programs in which they participated. This orientation often happened in a face-to-face interview between a staff

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[18] Nicaraguans I interviewed often disavowed that this history should matter to interactions. They wanted to meet travelers as individuals, not as representatives of their respective governments. The fact that they made such assertions illustrates that the citizenship of travelers was a relevant marker in cross-national interactions, even if that marker was consciously pushed away during encounters.
[19] In Chapter One I described a 1968 speech by Monsignor Ivan Illich which condemned short-term humanitarian aid or mission travel. In it, he commented on the extent of this disparity. He said, "Even the Peace Corps spends around $10,000 on each corps member to help him adapt to his new environment and to guard him against culture shock. How odd that nobody ever thought about spending money to educate poor Mexicans in order to prevent them from the culture shock of meeting you."

representative and a Nicaraguan applicant for a scholarship, a microloan, or a house. These interviews were bureaucratic in nature. To me, they felt similar to a trip to the Division of Motor Vehicles in the U.S. but without the stereotypical brusqueness of the DMV staff. Manos por Dios staff collected biographical information in order to suss out both the ability to repay a loan and the suitability for assistance. With projects happening in stages, choices had to be made about which of the viable candidates were most immediately "deserving." The interviewer would review with the candidate in careful detail the list of requirements for home ownership, which included a down payment, evidence of employment or income, agreement to a 15-year lease, and evidence of family stability.[20] The interviewer clarified the kinds of legal documents needed to secure a loan if the candidate were chosen. Manos por Dios held community meetings to explain their programs, but each recipient was also required to receive this information verbally and individually and to sign a contract that affirmed their comprehension of and commitment to the terms of the individual program.

Many Nicaraguans who interacted with Manos por Dios travelers had not experienced this kind of direct contact with the agency. Those indirectly affected by the organization included children of homeowners, neighbors of loan recipients, and residents of towns where the organization built a school or dug a well. Most of the time, these individuals learned about the organization's expectations for behavior during interactions in which rules were bent or broken by a Nicaraguan or a traveler. Staff or

[20] The 15-year loan term and stability requirement were aimed at giving children a chance to grow and attend school in a single community. In practice, stability was not a moral evaluation so much as a financial one. It meant having at least one able-bodied adult bringing in income and ideally another to care for the children. As far as I could gather, Manos por Dios did not terminate housing loans for families with known histories of domestic violence or suspected cases of incest, though they claimed to work to curb these practices.

travelers might have "reminded" Nicaraguans of rules that they had never been given formally. Reminders could enforce a rule, as when a child was told to stop asking travelers to give away their work gloves or baseball caps. Reminders could also explain that certain actions broke or bent rules, as when a traveler gave a Nicaraguan cash and warned him not to tell the Manos por Dios staff about it. Inconsistent enforcement of rules and uneven participation in various projects lent itself to the creation of "insider" and "outsider" Nicaraguans: “insiders” who knew the organizational rules and befriended staff and travelers and “outsiders” who saw groups pass through but had little access to or understanding of organizational conventions of engagement. Inconsistency and unevenness also fostered rumors and misinformation about the intentions and activities of Manos por Dios, its staff, and its U.S. and Nicaraguan clients.

Such challenges plague most aid and development organizations, Partners in Solidarity included. However, Manos por Dios was particularly susceptible to these problems because its staff tended to hold the philosophical conviction that evaluating need on a case-by-case or “episodic” basis was as important as having rules in the first place. This attitude emerged from and reinforced a personal approach to cross-national interactions. Some Nicaraguans responded by seeking out special relationships with or sponsorships from specific travelers. The next chapter discusses how gender shaped the ways such ties unfolded.

Whereas staff emphasized spirituality in their orienting discussions with travelers, they largely downplayed such talk when orienting Nicaraguans. In part, the lack of spiritual content was a byproduct of the instrumental goals of orientation, which focused on practicalities of particular aid programs. The suppression of spiritual content was also deliberate. As are many parachurch organizations that cater to

mainline Protestants and Catholics, Manos por Dios was deeply suspicious of religious travel with the goal of proselytizing. One staff person explained to a conservative Baptist traveler that there were two reasons why Manos por Dios discouraged activities such as sharing faith testimony or instructing Nicaraguans in religious participation. First, according to staff many Nicaraguans had expressed a distrust of foreigners who breezed in, urged conversion, and left quickly. To build the kinds of long-term trust necessary to create sustainable development programs, staff believed overt evangelism should take a back seat.

Second, staff shared a script that was common among religious volunteer or mission travelers in Latin America and Africa. They argued that travelers had more to learn from the deep and wholehearted faith of locals than vice versa. Partners in Solidarity staff and travelers made similar assertions. Where Manos por Dios staff did talk about spirituality with Nicaraguans was in the limited spaces where staff taught Nicaraguans reflection practices. This included youth participants in community after-school programs or in Young Life, an international religious organization for teens. Nicaraguan staff also regularly participated with U.S. staff in team meetings, retreats, and Bible studies.

Partners in Solidarity also used face-to-face meetings and spontaneous interactions to orient Nicaraguans toward a value of civic engagement. Community meetings were a key means for communicating expectations about the roles Nicaraguan partners should play in cross-national interaction. Weekly meetings of Comarco Este's pastoral committee were the norm. Sarah joined these meetings when she was in town. In Aldeas Cafés and Sacuanjoche, a requirement of partnership was the formation of a leadership committee and the convening of regular meetings. Sarah used those

meetings to set clear boundaries around the roles and responsibilities of Nicaraguans and travelers. Committee members in Aldeas Cafés often tried to defer to Sarah to make decisions concerning the structure of the committee, the choice of projects to fund, and so on. Her refrain was, "You need to decide what you want to do" about offering scholarships or managing money. Sarah knew her style of community leadership was unfamiliar, and she did make occasional recommendations. Whenever possible, she referred to successful programs in other Nicaraguan communities that she visited. Her message was that local knowledge made the Nicaraguans, not her, the experts. The Nicaraguans not only knew their greatest needs, they were the people best suited to deciding how to meet them. Sarah and the U.S. travelers were there to support them through fundraising, cheerleading, advocacy in international settings, and networking between locals and other Nicaraguans who might be able to help. In practice, communities often lacked expert knowledge of development and required know-how and technical assistance that Partners in Solidarity could provide. Chapter Six offers examples of how choices were made about when and how much to use this knowledge for interventions.

During day-to-day interactions, Partners in Solidarity reinforced an orientation toward the value of civic engagement and toward the different roles its staff believed that travelers and Nicaraguans should play. Partners in Solidarity took the position that Nicaraguans should be encouraged to become more active in their communities. When someone approached Sarah asking for aid, she encouraged the person to tell local leaders what kinds of support they wanted, explaining that Partners in Solidarity would only sponsor programs identified by local leaders. (In Chapter Six, I describe how she and travelers bent this rule from time to time). Micro-loan recipients went through six

months of training led by the Nicaraguan Director of Women's Projects that included business planning, financial management, and general leadership development. Those who received micro-loans or who labored side by side with Partners in Solidarity teams on construction projects were encouraged to become leaders themselves, to attend community meetings where decisions about community needs are made, and to demand accountability and governmental support. U.S. travelers were also encouraged to listen to Nicaraguan leaders, to fundraise or buy fair trade goods at home, to write letters to members of Congress, and to sign petitions that on foreign policy initiatives that might affect Nicaraguans.

Conclusion

Orientations to time and place call attention to selective experiences. They shape which past events will be considered relevant to present encounters, and they highlight either the immediate or the long-term future consequences of a particular set of actions.

An episodic approach encourages participants to think about interaction partners in personal, intimate terms. This focus directs people's attention away from concerns about cultural competency, structural dependency, or national identities. The episodic approach aims to tailor aid to a specific individual's need or to address poverty generally through the empowerment of individuals who will then transform their communities. In this view, travelers have great authority to decide how to act in any given face-to-face encounter. The "right thing to do" will be based on the specific circumstances even if this means circumventing the best practices of the organization.

Embedded approaches encourage thinking about the continuity between a specific historical trajectory, the present interaction, and the long-term consequences of that interaction. Travelers trying to adopt an embedded orientation are likely to stumble as they try to navigate the many relevant contexts that inform a particular interaction. The authority to define social relationships or to identify ideal courses of action is grounded in cultural fluency and specific historical knowledge rather than in personal life experience or intimate knowledge of another person. As a result, travelers often rely heavily on the facilitation of Nicaraguan translators or organizational staff.

This chapter describes organizational practices that direct travelers' attention to certain ways of interpreting the meaning of travel. In identifying these practices, I direct the readers' attention to particular ways of theorizing about how people make meaning out of their experiences. I argue that content is not the only or even the primary way that rules and stories communicate information about the meaning of a particular experience. As discussed above, the rhythms through which organizations teach rules and the settings in which stories are told are also effective methods of communicating shared meanings.

Theories about rule-driven learning focus on repetition of and compliance with rules. In this chapter, I have shown that the *rhythm* of rule giving matters as much as the rules themselves. In some cases, rhythms taught more than rules did. At Manos por Dios, rules such as "don't contact home" or "don't give cash to local residents" were repeated frequently and ignored consistently. Yet many of the most consistent rule breakers could readily articulate the conviction that travel changes lives one person at a time, whether by inspiring materialistic travelers or empowering impoverished Nicaraguans. Manos por Dios staff taught travelers to see each face-to-face encounter as

exceptional and potentially life altering. They did so partly with words. They also made encounters feel exceptional by dramatically shortening the time between offering a rule or advice and expecting travelers to put that rule into practice. As a habitual practice, this intense foreshortening of the time between rule giving and rule application teaches travelers to approach each encounter as a fresh, new experience with the potential for new rules to apply. In contrast, Partners in Solidarity teams rehearsed, repeated, revised, and reviewed rules together both before and after encounters. This organizational practice results in a completely different understanding of rule giving. Travelers acquire a sense that rules apply across a variety of face-to-face encounters and that the rules are designed to help manage and mitigate the short-, medium- and long-range consequences of such encounters.

This chapter also argues that storytelling promotes shared understanding of an experience by combining narrative with emotion management and the strategic use of settings. Stories about organizational history or about successful programs convey a narrative about how travel is supposed to work. By telling those stories in particular places, organizations provide tangible markers of the specific contexts in which they imagine their narratives to matter. Manos por Dios staff told stories in settings that were significant primarily to their own organization and to the Nicaraguan families that the organization had helped or had planned to help. They modeled the urgency and immediacy of the emotional impact that they hoped these experiences would have on travelers. By telling stories of personal triumph in these settings, they invited travelers to imagine similarly intimate and localized ways that cross-national encounters might catalyze personal transformations or journeys out of poverty. Partners in Solidarity travelers were taught instead to think globally by standing together at historic

landmarks to listen to stories about Nicaragua's political and economic histories. Travelers were invited to imagine themselves as Nicaraguan citizens at a particularly exciting crossroads in that history. Returning travelers to the present moment, travelers were redirected to their current roles as U.S. citizens, to the impacts U.S. actions have had in Nicaraguan since the revolution, and to imagining the positive impacts of developing relationships of solidarity with Nicaraguan communities. In stories told by both organizations, narrative and setting worked together to establish and reinforce particular and sharply contrasting visions of the impact that travelers can have on poverty alleviation efforts.

The next two chapters explain how episodic and embedded orientations matter in the day-to-day social interactions between travelers and Nicaraguans. Specifically, I examine how the desire to help vulnerable children is put into action through the lenses of episodic and embedded approaches to travel. Chapter Five examines how Manos por Dios travelers, with the leeway afforded by an episodic, intimate view of encounters, turn to gender as a guide for deciding how to intervene in the lives of Nicaraguan children. Chapter Six looks at how Partners in Solidarity travelers wrestle with their desire to help a particular promising child despite their conviction that collective interventions are preferable and in the long run necessary. Later chapters address the ways daily reflection processes teach travelers to not only adopt these orientations but to employ them in talk and action both during travel and upon return to their home communities.

Part 2: Interacting

The next three chapters examine what happened when U.S. travelers and Nicaraguan hosts encountered one another in the context of humanitarian aid provision. Each chapter addresses efforts by travelers or Nicaraguans to wrestle with questions about emotional intimacy and about stark inequalities in power and in access to resources. People who study or who hope to improve the practice of volunteer tourism have been particularly concerned about the unruly power of personal contact or of bonds that owe more to proximity, personality, and charisma than to carefully considered need or merit. Travelers and locals both appreciate the affirmation of self and the mutual affection that comes from making friends from another country. However, these friendships usually come with financial strings and expectations. Reliance on sponsors may interfere with development goals of self-empowerment, and special attention from donors can create jealousy and discord within local communities.

The research literature offers mixed assessments of the relationship between emotional bonds and awareness of structural causes of inequality. Some argue that the focus on personal connections prevents travelers from addressing the more difficult problem of systematic inequality.[1] In this school of thought, emotional bonds are almost always divorced from awareness of or advocacy against systematic inequalities. In contrast, sociologist Erica Bornstein has argued that the goals of charity and development can be integrated. Her book *Disquieting Gifts* argues that practices that academics treat as distinct – charity, humanitarianism, development, and the provision

[1] See, for example, Mostafanezhad, "Geography of Compassion."

of social welfare – are in practice often combined or blurred together under the larger rubric of "giving."

Chapters 5 and 6 offer empirical support for Bornstein's assertion that personal and structural approaches to poverty alleviation inform one another. These chapters describe interactions between Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity travelers and Nicaraguan children. They also describe the actions travelers took to meet the needs of those children. I focus on interactions with children because those were the encounters travelers singled out as most memorable and meaningful. In post-travel interviews I heard twice as many stories about children as about adults. Travelers openly expressed the hope that their personal encounters with children would leave a positive influence on them. During their encounters with Nicaraguan adults, they were not as forthcoming about their goals to change lives materially or spiritually.

These observations were consistent with literature on globalization that identifies childhood as a special category of personhood. Children are imagined to embody values of innocence, happiness, safety, and a kind of spiritual purity that is ripe with potential.[2] Flesh and blood children are vulnerable to dangers that might mar that innocence or purity. In a sense, volunteer tourists who intervene on behalf of children "buy" the privilege of personally guarding one child's universal right to safety and happiness. In the imagined fate of a needy child, the charitable impulse to help *right now* is blended with the more development-minded desire to nurture that child's potential and preserve his or her future.

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[2] Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*; Stephens, *Children and the Politics of Culture*.

From a shared starting point – a desire to secure a certain kind of future for children – the travelers I studied followed divergent paths of action. Shaped by either an episodic or an embedded orientation to travel, each path resulted in actions that integrated aid and development or individual and community-wide interventions. However, they did so in very different ways. I found the orientations that motivated their actions also influenced their different modes of integrating the personal and the structural. These modes of integration in turn led to distinct opportunities and complications for local Nicaraguans and their communities.

In Chapter 7, I further trouble the theoretical waters of aid and development by turning to Nicaraguan constructions of humanitarian encounters. I describe how Nicaraguans with little exposure to the orienting strategy of either Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity drew on their own local cultural models for understanding and enacting relationships with powerful interaction partners. They used two intimate interpersonal models of relationship to construct responses to gifts of aid. These strategies for achieving intimacy despite inequality impacted the ways Nicaraguans performed the role of "empowered" change agents in their communities – a role much valued in international development circles.

Chapter Five: Manos por Dios

When adult volunteers dream on behalf of poor children, they dream in the future tense. They wonder how actions taken today will affect these children in years to come by either preserving and prolonging a state of childhood innocence or preparing children to be strong, capable adults. The Manos por Dios teams I joined had a handful of volunteers who simply wanted to make kids smile by giving them small gifts such as toys, sports equipment, candy, or soda. More often travelers wanted to offer the kinds of gifts or support that would equip children for whole, healthy adulthood.

How did they decide what those interventions might be? Some asked Manos por Dios staff for advice. As I described in the previous chapter, however, exposure to an episodic orientation toward travel encouraged volunteers to look to their own insights for guidance on how to act. Manos por Dios missionaries advised travelers that the principles espoused by relief and development experts were helpful rules of thumb but that travelers should trust their instincts in extraordinary circumstances. As staff told and celebrated stories about serendipitous transnational connections, they conveyed a further message: *every* encounter had the potential to be extraordinary.

As I discovered while watching travelers interact with children, taking each encounter case by extraordinary case resulted in very different actions depending on the genders of the travelers and the children involved. The instincts travelers had about how to protect and nurture children were marked by gender. Travelers imagined boys and girls to be vulnerable to different hazards. They envisioned different kinds of solutions to these problems. Travelers were drawn to pre-adolescent boys with charisma and entrepreneurial spirit; they saw these boys as hustlers in need of gentle

reform. The potential they saw was for future pillars of the community and breadwinners for a nuclear family. With girls, travelers expressed great concern for adolescents, wanting to rescue them from early pregnancy. They saw education as the primary means to expand opportunities and instill self-respect. In turn, travelers imagined women's education to be a way to transform the structures and opportunities of entire families, including both families of origin and the families these girls might one day form.

Travelers' gender mattered, too. Men tended to act quickly and decisively, while women more often consulted fellow travelers or Manos por Dios staff before taking action. In those consultations, staff often suggested ways to participate in more long-term and systematic interventions, such as providing high school scholarships. In contrast, people who acted on their first instincts often took immediate and short-term steps, such as giving trinkets or gifts of cash. I also found a slight preference for same-gender connections. Men tended to bond with boys, women with girls. These gendered differences in strategies for action corresponded to different outcomes for boys and girls who bonded with volunteer tourists.

For the most part, Manos por Dios missionaries and travelers were socially conservative Southerners. While they thought boys and girls deserved equal access to education and employment, their aspirations for these children as they grew into adulthood reflected traditional gender roles. In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that the gendered imaginations that inform travelers' case-by-case interactions with children may have far-reaching consequences for the balance of power among men and women in Nicaraguan communities affected by international development programs. In seeking to target specific boys or girls with personally transformative gifts,

travelers contributed both consciously and inadvertently to upsetting the gendered structural inequalities of the status quo in the host community.

The stories below illustrate how an episodic orientation that urged people to take encounters on a case-by-case basis resulted in gendered differences in poverty alleviation efforts aimed at boys and girls.

I. A Gift for Daniel

Sam, a retired pilot, and his wife Allison, a homemaker, lived in Georgia when I joined their Evangelical congregation's second visit to Nicaragua with Manos por Dios in 2010. They had each been on several mission trips before; Allison's first trip was in 1999, and Sam's was in 2006. On their first trip with Manos por Dios to Nicaragua, Sam and Allison were deeply moved by an elderly woman's desire to build a church in her remote village. This woman had walked the several-mile distance to Santa Inés for many days in a row because she was determined to speak to the executive director of Manos por Dios, Paul, about building a church. With no access to a telephone or computer, she was unable to confirm that Paul would be available to speak with her, so she kept making the trip to Santa Inés until he was.

Both Paul and the team were so impressed by this woman's faith that they agreed to break ground that very week. Paul was known for acting on instinct. I had heard many stories of decisions he had made on the spur of the moment, from hiring staff to taking on new projects. Paul had a finely honed intuition, which he described as faith-driven. His "leaps of faith" had contributed in powerful ways to the growth of

Manos por Dios and its mission. Such stories encouraged travelers to trust their own intuitions as similarly potent guides for discerning the best courses of action.

Two years later, Sam and Allison told me that the thing they most looked forward to about their 2010 trip was seeing "their" church as a finished building. It was a pleasant surprise when they also reconnected with a boy named Daniel who was about ten years old. Sam told me that Allison was normally the one who attracted children they met on mission trips. "She can look them in the face," he explained, "and the smile she has and the smile they have is a connection." For Sam, a connection without words was more difficult. Daniel was different. "He came up and grabbed my hand," Sam told me, "and you know, it was kind of a connection there."

As Sam spent time with Daniel during that first trip in 2008, he got to see two sides of the boy. First, there was Daniel "the rascal" and "the little con man." This Daniel deliberately lost a game of checkers to butter Sam up before asking for money. This Daniel was aggressive with other children to the point that Sam thought he must be disliked for his bossiness. Then there was the tender Daniel. One day, Sam cut his arm on some protruding barbed wire. The boy used the hem of his shirt to staunch the blood. Sam observed him showing similar care to his younger siblings.

In 2010 Daniel was the same clever, mischievous boy they remembered. He quickly learned that the team members on this trip were not the type to give away dollar bills or ball caps. So he engineered a new plan. He knew travelers preferred "real" Coke to the local Big Cola brand. With gestures and some translation help from a Spanish-fluent volunteer, Daniel told Sam he planned to buy Cokes at the local stores for 75 cents apiece and deliver them to the worksite. He would sell them to team members for $3 a bottle. Sam told some of the other travelers about this plan. His tone conveyed

pride in Daniel's ingenuity. I was skeptical and wondered who would pay a 300 percent markup for Coke when they could simply walk down the street to the nearest store?

Daniel read his audience better than I had. Throughout the week, team members had encouraged the children to "learn capitalism" by suggesting ways that they could earn money instead of begging for it.[1] In fact, Sam shared Daniel's plan with me during a conversation in which another traveler was lecturing a local girl about a similar business model. She suggested that the girl buy up "Coca Lites" in the morning and sell them for more money to body-conscious American women in the afternoon. To my knowledge, Daniel never actually bought any Cokes, much less sold them to travelers. Instead, his entrepreneurial intentions were rewarded by praise and positive attention from the foreign work team.

Daniel's charisma, wit, compassion, and ambition both inspired and worried the couple from Georgia. "He's sort of right at that point where he could go either way," Allison mused. That is, she explained, he could channel his abilities in a positive direction and become an amazing leader, provide for his family, excel at school, and inspire other boys. He could also go the other way, applying his wits and entrepreneurial spirit to membership in a gang, dropping out of school, selling drugs, or becoming a full-time scam artist.

Sam wanted to give Daniel a gift that would be a reminder that he was special and that he was called to a higher purpose than just survival. He put a great deal of thought into this gift. He wanted it to be practical, durable, and personal. After seeing

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[1] This team's members were particularly vocal about their conservative political beliefs. Several members believed that Nicaragua's economic woes could be attributed entirely to a combination of communism and domestic political corruption. I describe this team in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Daniel hike up his too-loose pants, Sam decided on a belt embossed with Daniel's name and a Bible verse. The verse was Sam and Allison's way of sharing their Christian faith. Sam suggested it would be a reminder that the Bible is an ever-available source for future guidance in maintaining a virtuous life. Sam and Allison also hoped putting his name on the belt would prevent Daniel's family from selling it later. This was the only time I heard either of them refer to Daniel's parents.

Sam was choosy in his shopping, rejecting belts that were too big, elaborately tooled, or not genuine leather. He asked volunteer coordinator Jen where he might find a belt; she directed him to several stores. Ultimately, I followed Sam, Jen, and Allison to a tanner who could provide both the leather and hand-tooled engraving. Sam, with no Spanish, and the engraver, with no English, enacted a pantomime as Sam selected a belt, confirmed the inscription, and agreed to a price and delivery date. Jen provided translation when gestures failed.

At one point, Allison engaged help from a boy near the tanner shop who was about Daniel's size so that they could select the perfect length for a belt, with room to grow. The boy lingered on the stoop, hoping his services and conversation would be rewarded. He got a piece of candy but no coins. Finally, the transaction was complete. Allison sounded both content and resigned when she said, "I don't even know if he has any pants with belt loops he can wear it with. Oh, well. It will be his."

Sam and Allison chose an object of daily use so that Daniel would have an ongoing reminder that he was loved. Yet that gift was the culmination, not the start, of their relationship with him. It was Sam who forged a bond with Daniel, and it was Sam's instinct to offer a gift. In our post-travel interviews, there was no mention of a future connection or an ongoing relationship or sponsorship. They remembered him with

affection, but he was not their first or fondest memory of the 2010 trip. They attributed their best memory to their visit to the church that they helped establish during their first trip in 2008.

Encounters with Boys

The story of Sam, Allison, and Daniel illustrates several common elements I witnessed in the encounters that Manos por Dios travelers shared with children in the field. First, Sam and Allison's interactions with Daniel were separate from the experiences of the team as a whole. Second, Daniel was typical of the kinds of boys to which travelers were drawn. He was rambunctious and mischievous but showed signs of sweetness or care for his family. Travelers saw boys such as Daniel as having a great deal of potential to become men who would be compassionate breadwinners, community leaders, and Christian role models. Third, the adults in Daniel's life were distanced from this interaction and imagined as obstacles rather than allies in Sam and Allison's vision for Daniel's future. Finally, Sam acted on his own initiative with the consent but not the guidance of Manos por Dios staff. Taking initiative was routine for Manos por Dios volunteers, though what they did when they acted on their own initiative varied. Below, I address each of these features in greater depth.

One-on-one Connections

Neither Sam nor Allison talked much about Daniel with their teammates. Members of the team knew Sam enjoyed the boy's company, but they were generally absorbed with their work or with their own connections to a particular boy or girl in the

community. The eldest member of the volunteer team told me in a post-travel interview, "I think all of us had a special little girl or guy that we focused in on…. There was a little boy there. When I left, he got my sunglasses, my hat, my gloves, and all that. I left them with him."

In that team of ten, I witnessed five people connect with one or more particular children for the week. They kept tabs on the child's comings and goings, played, offered parental advice, and left behind gifts. Team members were aware of one another's special friendships but rarely discussed them. Pursued independently, these encounters each came to their own separate yet often similar conclusions. Sam's gift to Daniel involved more care and thought than the gifts his fellow travelers left. In all other respects, his warm feelings about Daniel were unexceptional. These separate, parallel stories of connection resonated with an episodic orientation toward taking interactions on a case-by-case basis and finding meaning in their particularity.

Darling Rascals in Need of Reform

When travelers made these brief connections with particular children, what drew them to some children and not others? For Manos por Dios travelers, a certain type of boy commanded attention. Like Daniel, these boys had an assertive, charismatic, and mischievous energy. At the work site they might brag about their strength and enthusiastically shovel dirt into and around a bucket before quickly losing interest in tedious labor. Instead, these boys cajoled travelers into play or spent time begging for trinkets or Córdobas (coins). Through persistence and ready charm, they inveigled gifts

or personal attention. When charm and persistence failed, some boys resorted to pickpocketing.

The havoc these boys wreaked at the work site was offset by glimpses of their vulnerability and compassion. Travelers remembered some boys specifically because they took care of family members. One boy was given an entire granola bar. He immediately divided it into several small pieces to share with his younger sister and the other children around him. Another, probably five or six years old, found 100 Córdobas (roughly $5 USD). Clutching it tightly with a beaming smile, he announced that he would give it to his mother so she could buy a house. For Sam and Allison, Daniel was this kind of boy: naughty but loving. They perceived his begging and hustling for money to be motivated by a desire to take care of his family under desperate circumstances.

To travelers from the U.S., boys like Daniel became symbols of the promise and vulnerability of coming of age on the margins of poverty. In their home communities, travelers might perceive petty theft, bossiness around other children, and begging for treats as warning signs of a bully or a troubled child. In Nicaraguan villages, those same behaviors among pre-adolescent children, especially boys, sent travelers different signals. Theft and begging were still seen as morally inappropriate actions, but travelers offered a variety of explanations for why a basically good kid might engage in them.

Some travelers dismissed attempts to manipulate adults as a normal phase of growing up: “boys will be boys.” Others excused misbehavior as “acting out” and a cry for any kind of sustained adult attention. In families where the father was out in the fields or non-existent, the mother worked every waking minute, and many siblings competed for parental attention, travelers said, no wonder these boys craved attention from foreigners. A few travelers also expressed fear that at least some of the children

were emotionally or physically abused.

Finally, some travelers described theft and begging as creative adaptations to a unique environment. The options for employment for pre-teens in rural Nicaragua were limited. In the cities, children of this age and even younger could shine shoes, sell bootlegged music or movies, or sell beautifully folded palm leaves in the shapes of grasshoppers or *sacuanjoches* (the national flower of Nicaragua). In the countryside where teams of Manos por Dios travelers volunteered, some children sold knotted yarn bracelets. More often, would-be pre-teen breadwinners operated in a moral "gray area," relying on charm, begging, and theft to get attention and gifts. Some travelers remarked that theft was to be expected where foreign visitors regularly walked through struggling communities carrying cash and expensive goods such as cameras. As one middle school teacher from Ohio put it, "It's not a diss on the kids, because they're just taking advantage of opportunities." In other words, children who begged or even stole were adapting their ambitions and cleverness into opportunistic – even entrepreneurial – actions suited to their environment.

Absent and Culpable Parents

Travelers who wanted to protect vulnerable children saw themselves as able to provide critical resources that the families of these children could not afford. Usually, travelers viewed parental absence or indifference as part of the problem that boys faced as they tried to grow up into strong men. Nonetheless, efforts by travelers to provide specific assistance of any kind to boys, particularly rascal-types like Daniel, generally took place without the input or consent of parents. On the other hand, as I will describe

later in the chapter, travelers who went out of their way to assist a particular girl sometimes made connections with the girl's parents as well.

In interviews, I asked travelers to comment generally on the Nicaraguan culture they observed. Many offered remarks about the love and loyalty people showed their families. A former Mormon missionary to Chile said of Latin America generally, "It's a culture of strong families and people who are kind and loving." Travelers pointed out the kindnesses of children to one another or the cleanliness of children in a land of dust and mud as signs of good parenting. Hardworking single mothers were also lauded for their dedication. However, when travelers shifted from talk about Nicaraguan culture to talk about the needs of children, their comments about parents were less complimentary.

For example, Sam and Allison assumed Daniel lacked strong adult role models in the home. They worried aloud that his parents might violate the norms of a gift exchange by selling the "expensive" belt Daniel received. I heard volunteers and staff from both organizations express disgust at the idea that parents might use their children instrumentally to manipulate volunteers into giving them money. For example, when a boy named Carlos stole someone's camera, a team member suggested that there was no point in going to the boy's father to resolve the problem. For all we knew, the volunteer speculated, the father would either beat the boy in punishment or reward him for bringing home an object with substantial resale value.

Not all parents were negligent in the minds of travelers. Single mothers received a great deal of praise for creating clean, loving households while searching for work and caring for both children and elderly relatives. Adult men took the brunt of the criticism of travelers. Most men of working age were not at home during the hours that

volunteers spent in the communities. Some were working in nearby fields; others were in Costa Rica or the U.S. and sent home remittances. The men that travelers saw were often at leisure, playing cards or napping in hammocks while their spouses cooked, cleaned, cared for the children, and helped the volunteers at the worksites. Travelers also heard rumors of men who set up households with women in multiple communities, who spent their income on alcohol or cockfights before buying food for the family, and who beat their sons and abused their daughters or nieces.

Stereotypes, rumors, and striking observations made it easy for travelers to think the worst of men and difficult for them to remember hardworking ones who traveled far from home to provide for their families. Even when travelers acknowledged admiration of these hardworking fathers, they worried that boys spent more time witnessing men's vices than learning from their virtuous but physically distant fathers. At some point, mischievous boys would become teens and men whose foibles were no longer forgivable. Travelers engaged boys at least partly with the aim of discouraging them from such a path to adulthood. As with most of the brief interactions travelers had with children, the travelers based their assumptions about the boys' future on an imagined rather than an embodied relationship with the boys and their parents.

Acting to Reform

Earlier I argued that Manos por Dios taught travelers to trust their instincts when they interacted with Nicaraguans. For some travelers, that meant acting impulsively on charitable motivations. One pastor gave a young woman twenty dollars in cash. He later confessed to a Manos por Dios missionary that he felt conflicted about

his action. The missionary absolved him and explained that this particular woman, whom she knew well, had a great and immediate need and would use that money to feed her family. This approach of "ask forgiveness, not permission" was more common among the men I traveled with than the women. For example, Sam gave careful thought to the gift he gave Daniel. However, he did not consult his wife or fellow travelers. Nor did he fret out loud about whether the belt was bending the "no gifts" policy of Manos por Dios. Instead, he asked Jen where he could buy the object. Her willing participation in the shopping excursion was implicit affirmation.

Charity was not the only instinct driving volunteer actions. Some travelers had strong opinions about how to pursue poverty alleviation efforts. These opinions predated their time with Manos por Dios. For example, Bert was an Evangelical Christian who was born in a rural Mexican village and immigrated to the U.S. as a boy. As a veteran, corrections officer, and church leader, Bert had a great deal of experience thinking about how the moral character and leadership skills of individuals could shape whole communities. Amidst the beauty of Santa Inés, Bert was troubled by the lack of strong local leaders. He perceived adults in the town to be dependent on the foreign missionaries to provide the vision and drive to make projects happen in the community. Bert believed the community would need internal leadership if its residents hoped to break away from a cycle of poverty.

This conviction shaped Bert's interactions with Carlos, whom I referred to above as the boy who stole a camera. Bert later told me that when the camera disappeared, he suddenly knew why God had called him to go to Nicaragua. It was to use a shared language and similar upbringing to connect to the group of boys who hung around at the worksite that day. He hoped that a conversation would inspire the thief to return

the camera. He also hoped to teach the children something about God and forgiveness. About an hour after the camera was taken, the team watched as a crowd of children, mostly boys, gathered in a circle around Bert. The man had his hand on the shoulder of a boy in faded blue shorts and a grubby white t-shirt. The boy, Carlos, sobbed openly as Bert spoke. Someone on the team gestured admiringly to Bert and said, "Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me.'" As the team looked on, Carlos broke away from Bert, running to recover and then return the stolen camera.

That evening, a fellow volunteer asked Bert to share what he had told the children. Bert said that he told them a parable. He said that there were two paths to follow in life. One path was wide and easy to cross but led to hell. The other path was narrow and difficult but held the ultimate reward of heaven. He linked this story to his admiration for strong leaders. He told the children that being a leader meant taking the narrow path. He pointed to each one in turn and said, "God wants to rise up a leader in this community. And it could be you."

After Carlos confessed and returned the camera, Bert wanted to praise and inspire Carlos some more. He escorted Carlos and a trail of more than thirty children to a house nearby where the family sold sodas. He bought a Coke for each child. While they drank, he praised Carlos in front of them all. He told the boy, "I bet it was hard for you to show all your friends that you took it. How embarrassed you must have been. It takes a great leader to say you were wrong. And you just told 33 of your friends that you were wrong. And you made something right. And that takes a good leader." Bert's story of connecting with the boys and of Carlos returning the camera was inspiring for the volunteers who witnessed the scene.

Like Sam, Bert acted on instincts without consulting the staff of Manos por Dios. In this case, Bert's instincts told him that what Carlos and each of his friends needed was not a scolding or a sponsor. They needed recognition and confidence. Bert believed he was placed on Carlos's path not to walk with him but to point the way. Bert said that he believed that Carlos and children like him had the capability of becoming strong leaders if they learned to think and make decisions for themselves. By speaking of God and parables, Bert tried to teach the children that the Bible was an important source of guidance for keeping on the path through the narrow gate.

Bert's interactions with Carlos were limited to advice and praise. A gift beyond the Coke would have contradicted his insistence that it is the job of God to inspire people with the ambition to lead and the job of the individual to rise to the challenge of leading his or her community. Bert's interactions with Carlos paralleled Sam's interactions with Daniel in meaningful ways. They both identified boys who were known "troublemakers" as having the potential to become strong, steady men. They both offered what they understood to be a nudge in the "right" direction. Both saw the right direction as a Christian path. Neither sought a prolonged relationship. Both acted on their convictions without consulting others first.

In contrast, I recount below two stories of travelers who did consult the staff of Manos por Dios for advice regarding personal interactions with children. In the first, a man and woman shared a story about a girl that prompted a team-wide discussion of the needs of teen girls in Nicaragua. In the second, a woman with a special bond to a particular girl repeatedly checked in with Manos por Dios staff about how best to serve this girl's needs. As a result of these consultations, the woman's generosity to the girl

grew even as she attempted to set firmer boundaries around the kinds of support she was willing to offer.

Several travelers reached out to teammates or staff for ideas about how to help poor children – whether children in general or a particular child who caught their attention. For the most part, the travelers seeking advice were individual women or heterosexual couples whose initial contact with a child had come through the woman. Communications with other travelers or staff clearly shaped the interactions between these women and the children they met. For example, on another Manos por Dios trip Bert's friend Carlos also caught the attention of two women who were both teachers. Wondering how Carlos might best be helped, they looked into his background. His teacher reported that he skipped school regularly and that his father was abusive. Manos por Dios programs dealt in educational opportunities, not domestic violence. Carlos was too young for a high school scholarship, and his grades made him an unlikely candidate in any event. On of the U.S. teachers said that Carlos needed not educational support but rather "a scholarship for life." After carefully weighing their options, the teachers both decided not to sponsor Carlos. As one of them explained, she suspected his needs would require interventions above and beyond her capacity or the mission of Manos por Dios. Unsure if she wanted to be entangled with Carlos and his family for years to come, she decided not to undertake further intervention on his behalf.

The next two stories relate to encounters between travelers and girls. These encounters pointed travelers toward a very different dilemma – teen sexuality – and a different set of actions toward protecting girls.

II. The Girl with the Bowl

At the Manos por Dios dorms, the front porch was the place to gather at the end of a long day. Informal conversations meandered. The creaks of rocking chairs and clinking of ice in glasses were punctuated by the clicks of geckos that crawled across the walls and porch ceiling. At one of these gatherings two experienced travelers, Leah and Matt, described an encounter that troubled them. These Spanish-fluent travelers had several conversations with a fifteen-year-old girl over the course of that day. I had seen them talking to her earlier, but I never caught her name. If Matt or Leah learned it, they did not share it with the group that evening. Instead, they brought up the story in order to discuss more generally a concern that weighed on the minds of many volunteers: the young ages at which many Nicaraguan girls began having sex and babies.

Leah and Matt related their efforts to exhort the girl to stay in school. They laughed while recounting their own earnestness. It is important to finish, they insisted, and boyfriends can come after. Leah remembered, "I said '21'" is a good age for boyfriends. "And then I said, 'And your boyfriend has to have finished school.'"

"Oooh," replied another woman on the team, "That's good!"

Matt explained that they later saw the teenager hanging out by the *bodega* (warehouse) with a boy about her age. She had a plastic bowl tucked up under her shirt. Matt thought the bowl made her look pregnant. Having witnessed this scene from across the street, I was surprised at his interpretation. I found the girl's posture and gestures unremarkable. Had I given it any thought, I would have assumed she was using her shirt to dry the bowl after cleaning it in the nearby spigot.

Matt and Leah pounced on the moment and approached her once more. "Why would you do that?" he asked her, gesturing to the bowl. "Do you know you look pregnant?"

She shrugged, removed the bowl from under her shirt, and said, "I don't know."

The questions continued. "Is this your boyfriend?"

"No, just a friend."

Her friend interjected, "But she does have a boyfriend!"

Apparently, that lit a fire under Leah. Matt explained to the now fully engaged team members on the porch, "Then Leah gave the sermon about 'you don't need a boyfriend,' and 'finish school,' and 'your boyfriend goes to school,' and blah blah blah…"

"I told you I don't mince words," Leah retorted.

Matt continued the story about the girl, "Twenty minutes later, she's kinda sweet with that boy, sitting over there with him with the bowl under her shirt again just like she's pregnant." He paused, searching for words to interpret the encounter. "That, to me, it seemed…"

"That was the aspiration." Leah supplied.

"Exactly," Matt agreed. "She was aspiring to go from a 15 year old girl to pregnant." There was a brief pause as the group absorbed this idea.

"What's their alternative?" another team member asked. The people on the porch spoke over each other, describing why girls might desire pregnancy, clucking over low self-esteem, or expressing admiration over Leah's forceful approach. The questioner asked again, more insistently, "And what's the alternative?"

"Education," replied a Manos por Dios employee who was a recent college graduate from the U.S. "It's education. It's some sort of involvement." He went on to

describe the organization's expanded vision for doing more than putting roofs over people's heads by also providing social programs designed to change lives.

To him, the problem of teen pregnancy in Nicaragua was a problem of men taking advantage of a girl's low self-esteem and desire for love. He hoped that investing in girls through education and social programming would communicate the message, "Hey, you're worth something…. Get someone to respect you for who you are." He believed that self-worth would lead to girls making different choices about their sexual behavior.

Rescuing Girls

Travelers discussing the problems of girls spoke most often about 12-16 year olds and a desire to rescue them from early pregnancy and family formation. Over and over, I heard travelers with both organizations express dismay at the thought of young Nicaraguan girls being boxed into a life of early motherhood and physical drudgery, often as a single parent or the sole breadwinner of the household. Those fears were grounded in a mix of observation and constructed moral narrative. The average ages of first sexual encounters, union formation, and childbearing of Nicaraguans is statistically among the lowest in comparison with other countries in the Americas.[2] More than they were used to encountering in the U.S., travelers met women who were grandmothers in their thirties, who had children by multiple fathers, and who struggled as single parents. A strong correlation between early fertility and low educational attainment has been

[2] Heaton, Forste, and Otterstrom, "Family Transitions in Latin America."

observed in many societies, Nicaragua included.[3] Volunteer tourists clearly recognized and worried about the practical and economic implications of early family formation for women and their families.

For Christian travelers, particularly the religiously and socially conservative Southerners who traveled with Manos por Dios, moral dimensions of early sex mattered, too. Travelers were troubled by what they learned of local marital and sexual customs. Relatively few Nicaraguans they met had marriages officiated by the state or by the church. Male sexual promiscuity appeared to be a given, and women appeared resigned to accepting that marriage and fidelity are exceptions rather than normative standards of behavior. Qualitative research on Nicaraguan teen attitudes about premarital sex corroborated traveler perceptions of a gender gap in sexual mores. For instance, four in five young Nicaraguan men reported being encouraged to pursue sex before marriage, while most young women reported the opposite.[4]

For the Manos por Dios employee mentioned above and the volunteers he spoke with, the problem of teen pregnancy was a problem of girls being taught to undervalue themselves. Their lack of self-worth and desire for positive attention made them vulnerable to flattery and persuasion. Their parents and peers did little to encourage them to dream of a different kind of life. Travelers floated a culture of poverty hypothesis: Nicaraguan parents were too busy working for the next meal to think beyond tomorrow. Inadvertently, they taught their daughters to live in the present rather than dream for the future. The teams also talked with varying degrees of sophistication and subtlety about the role of *machismo* culture in negatively shaping

[3] Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes, "Teen Fertility."
[4] Rani, Figueroa, and Ainsle, "Young Adult Sexual Behavior in Nicaragua."

women's sexuality. Ultimately, they saw education as a means to empower girls to fight the tide of these cultural messages.

The value of school was constantly emphasized in interactions travelers had with children of both genders. "Are you in school? What grade?" were often the first questions travelers asked a child. Young children were asked to recite the alphabet or to count. They often did so in English to the delight of travelers. Fourth through sixth graders were sometimes asked to share their ambitions, and travelers made encouraging responses. The reactions of travelers followed their own notions of the distinction between a job and a career. They nodded and smiled at the children who wanted to be security guards or taxi drivers; they oohed, aahhed, and even cheered and applauded those who wanted to be teachers, doctors, lawyers, or the president.

With boys, travelers saw themselves as nudging young men with potential toward a noble and challenging but familiar path to adulthood. With girls, they saw themselves as doing something more. By encouraging girls to stay in school, they hoped to encourage girls to measure self-worth through education and ambition rather than through the sexual attention of men. These volunteers saw education as the primary means of transforming individual women's opportunities and self-esteem. In turn, education and self-esteem were anticipated to change the structures and opportunities of young women's families of origin and of the families they would one day form.

For older girls like the one in the story above, praise for educational accomplishments were accompanied by frank advice to stay in school and leave the boyfriends behind. For some travelers and some girls, these brief encounters developed into long-term educational sponsorship as I relate in the story below.

III. A Sponsor for Carolina

I only met Carolina once in passing. What I know of her and her family, I learned from her sponsor. A nurse from Georgia, Marge started traveling with Manos por Dios in 2004 and had taken about two trips a year with the organization ever since. She traveled often for two main reasons. First, in Nicaragua she experienced "simplicity." She felt like time and people moved more slowly there, following an ebb and flow that seemed more connected to "the essence of life, to what's important." Her life in the U.S. was filled with distractions – particularly the distractions of a materialistic culture. She wanted to get away from those distractions and refocus her attention on the essence of life. Her second reason for traveling was the relationship that she had developed with Carolina. She proudly related the girl's accomplishments to me several times before, during, and after our trip together.

Carolina lived in Santa Inés along with Daniel and Carlos. She was ten years old in 2005 when she and Marge met. They got to know one another while digging ditches for water pipelines. Carolina could "dig circles" around fifty-something Marge. What struck Marge was "just how strong Carolina was, how funny she was, how she made me laugh, and I made her laugh." Neither spoke the other's language, but their mutual affection was clear, and Carolina gave Marge a plastic ring as a going-away present.

Over the years Marge got to know Carolina's family. The family treated Marge as someone special in their lives. Carolina came to trust that Marge was committed to helping with her education. The scholarship coordinator of Manos por Dios recognized Marge's interest as an opportunity. He told her that Carolina was a bright, committed student who would benefit from a more rigorous academic program than the one

offered at the local high school. Marge agreed to increase her monthly remittance so Carolina could "get a far superior education" at a private high school.

Early in the relationship, Marge and Carolina's parents had different expectations about what sponsorship meant. Speaking of sponsorships generally, Marge told me, "Sometimes the adults use the children to approach us and ask for money." Daughters became go-betweens or active brokers as adults negotiated boundaries. While some sponsors gave family members small gifts, Marge would not. She learned to set clear boundaries with Carolina's family after they urged Carolina to ask for a television in one of her letters. Later, Marge also turned down their request for some money to throw a *quinceñera* (a coming-of-age party) for Carolina's sister.

I asked Marge if it was sometimes hard to stick to her boundaries, particularly when Carolina's siblings had needs of their own. "Not anymore," she replied. "It's actually very easy… because I don't want to cause more harm." The harm she imagined was that a flow of objects would infect the family with the kind of materialism that Marge saw as a pervasive part of U.S. culture. She believed this materialism destroyed the spirit. Enamored of the simplicity and access to "spirit" she found in Nicaragua, she did not want to expose Carolina or her family to the temptations and corruption of thinking happiness came from material objects such as a new TV or an expensive party.

Sponsoring Girls … and Their Families?

Marge and Carolina's story highlights two key differences between the treatment of boys and girls by North Americans. First, travelers were drawn to a different set of personal characteristics in girls than in boys. Like Daniel, Carolina

showed kindness to travelers, but unlike Daniel, Carolina met Marge in shared work, not shared play. Marge described Carolina's sustained efforts to work side by side with the travelers, smiling and gesturing expressively while continuing to work. In contrast, Daniel did his best to cajole travelers away from work or to corner them during a break for water. I heard several travelers describe girls like Carolina who stayed by the side of volunteers as a quiet but constant presence, whether simply observing or participating in the labor process. This characterization affirmed stereotypes travelers held about Nicaraguan women: that they do what must be done to provide for their families, no matter how difficult the task. A girl who demonstrated conscientiousness by sharing the workload embodied for travelers this womanly responsibility to care for those around her.

Second, sponsors like Marge who invested in the education of girls inevitably developed relationships with their families as well. Travelers and parents had to negotiate complicated differences in values and expectations. Well-meaning sponsors rarely had more in common with parents than a sincere affection for their daughter. The parents I met spoke lovingly of the affection these U.S. foreigners showed their daughters. They sometimes called sponsors "godparents." However, mutual positive regard could not fully alleviate the worries of some travelers that parents might become antagonists rather than allies in the travelers' efforts to see girls through to the completion of high school.

The importance of education for most travelers was assumed. Over three-quarters of the travelers I interviewed had a college or postgraduate education. In their minds, education changed the ways people thought and the ways they engaged the world. It was the key to employment. However, Nicaraguan parents were no doubt aware of the

problems with such logic in the context of day-to-day life in their communities. Education was no guarantee of employment in a country where nearly half of working adults were underemployed.[5] Moreover, as much as parents desired a better life for their children, the abstract hope of an expansive worldview did little to alleviate the daily struggle to put food on the table. For sponsorships to work amicably, parents had to agree that education was a more valuable use of their daughter's time than employment or caretaking of family members.

There were other areas of misunderstanding besides conflicting priorities about education. Another area of confusion involved expectations about what a sponsor owed to whom. Would sponsors pay only for education or for other expenses like clothing? Did sponsors have a relationship with just the one girl or were her family members also going to be provided with assistance? Manos por Dios did help sponsors manage the expectations of families by facilitating contact between sponsors and family members. Letters were translated and transported by organizational staff. Remittances flowed through the agency's scholarship program for secondary schools. Even with such oversight, Nicaraguan girls and their families sought out and received special attention and rewards. Decisions of sponsors about the management of those requests could exert influence on a host of social relationships, including the relationships of girls and their parents and the relationships of sponsored families to neighbors with no sponsors.

Carolina's family urged her to ask Marge for more support. Through Carolina, Marge set firm boundaries. Marge was focused on changing Carolina's future, and to secure that future she was willing to alienate Carolina's parents in the present. Marge

[5] CIA, "The World Factbook."

thought that securing income for the family's present needs was the responsibility of adults and that making Carolina responsible for that task was a violation of her right to childhood. By placing boundaries on her giving, Marge understood herself to be securing Carolina's future by protecting her from harm in the present, including the harm of the materialism she thought Carolina's parents felt.

Since I was unable to interview Carolina or her family, I did not learn how Carolina felt about being put in the middle of a disagreement between her parents and her sponsor. Perhaps Carolina was as uncomfortable as Marge imagined and felt manipulated by the desires of her parents. However, I could imagine an alternate scenario. After all, Carolina was the focal point of a powerful source of potential income. She and other girls in her position might leverage that power to take on new statuses within their families of origin. She might become a gatekeeper with real if limited power to control her family's access to Marge or some other sponsor and to decide which of the requests made by her parents and siblings should be brought before her sponsor.

In Carolina's case, such requests would clearly be futile. Marge's intentions for Carolina's future included sheltering her from the lure of materialism. However, other sponsors drew broader boundaries and deliberately included additional family members in their commitment of support. I met another couple who sponsored at least three children. One of these sponsorships was formalized through a church ceremony recognizing the couple as the girl's godparents. They saw their goddaughter's family as part of their circle of adoption. They regularly visited the family, bringing small gifts such as tomato seeds for the father. They also envisioned their support of this girl as a way to empower and lift up her entire family.

Their intentional efforts to make that empowerment happen were sometimes overly

ambitious. For instance, the wife announced one morning that she was considering paying for private English lessons for her goddaughter. She said, "I'd love to send her and then just have her teach the rest of her family. That'd be so neat." She even bought the family a game that taught English and Spanish using flash cards. These godparents had made the mental connection that education shaped entire families, not just educated children. It was unlikely, however, that such influence would happen the way they imagined, with the girl teaching her family members the lessons she learned in class. How many parents would have the motivation, discipline, support, and time to learn English from a novice speaker who was also their daughter?

Sponsors hoped that their actions would transform the lives of the girls, their families of origin, and the future families those girls might one day form. While sponsors like Marge expressed concerns about the complications their actions might cause for girls in the context of their family situations, the sponsors rarely raised the issue of potential harm in terms of social relationships beyond the family. I asked the woman who sponsored three children if she thought her relationship with her goddaughter caused problems for the girl in her community. The woman simply did not understand what I was asking her. She pointed out that she always gave money to Manos por Dios rather than to the family directly. I tried to ask the question in a different way. Did she think her visits and attention made other people in the village jealous? Possibly, she conceded, but those people had their own opportunities to seek aid from Manos por Dios. It had not occurred to her that the very existence of a relationship between her and her goddaughter might have community-wide impacts. When the subject was raised, she maintained that she saw no dangers but on the contrary she saw opportunities for the community. She said that the special attention she gave to her

goddaughter could be perceived as a signal to community members that if this girl could use a scholarship to create a better life for herself, perhaps other individuals could have similar opportunities one day.

The next chapter details an opposing view of the potential drawbacks of special relationships between travelers and specific children or teenagers. In it, I document how a Partners in Solidarity team was troubled by the fear that the appearance of favoritism might have negative consequences in developing communities.

Consequences of Gendered Interactions

How did children like Daniel and Carolina compare to others who encountered travelers? How did these personal, sometimes idiosyncratic, encounters contribute to gendered patterns of engagement? Typically, the spontaneous, face-to-face meetings I witnessed between travelers and children were brief. In post-travel interviews, travelers with Manos por Dios mentioned boys twice as often as they mentioned girls.[6] They remembered the energy, kindness, or assertiveness of boys. However, when I saw or heard stories about travelers having extended and repeated contact with children, they were almost exclusively with girls.

To get a sense of the extent of this gender divide across the communities where Manos por Dios worked, I studied documentation about the organization's scholarship program. Manos por Dios systematically selected promising high school and college students to receive scholarships. This program was largely separate from the programs aimed at religious volunteer travelers. When a bond developed between a particular

[6] I interviewed the same number of men and women travelers from Manos por Dios (26 of each).

child and a traveler such as Marge or the couple described above, the scholarship program was a convenient way to channel travelers' affection and ambitions for that child through an established Manos por Dios program of monetary support. Most scholarship sponsors from the U.S. never met their scholarship students, much less exchange frequent letters or return for annual visits as Marge did. Instead, sponsors typically allowed Manos por Dios to match them to a student and never met the student in question.

I can estimate the extent to which sponsors and children developed personal relationships by examining the content of videos posted on the Manos por Dios website. In 2010 Manos por Dios missionaries filmed 96 scholarship recipients sending brief messages of gratitude to their U.S. sponsors. For the most part, students offered thanks to unspecified foreign donors, to Manos por Dios, and sometimes to God for the opportunity of an education. Six girls thanked their sponsors personally and by name, saying things like: "Hi Kathy, how are you?! I am going into my 5th year of high school. I am very happy that you continue to support me. I love you very much. Thank you!"

Manos por Dios scholarships were divided fairly evenly between boys (44 percent) and girls (56 percent). Based on these videos, roughly 10 percent of female scholarship recipients knew their sponsors well and spoke to them as fictive kinship relations. None of the boys did.[7] What difference did it make when foreigners were investing additional money, time, and emotional energy into 10 percent of the girls who went to high school but none of the boys?

[7] I only heard of one boy who received regular visits from a sponsor. He resided in an orphanage for the physically and developmentally disabled, and it was unclear whether he could recognize and remember his sponsors or the other travelers who visited him.

I found that girls with long-term sponsors had considerable social capital among peers and within families. Children competed to see who could hold a traveler's hand the longest or offer the prettiest flower or token of affection. How much more exciting was it, then, for Carolina to wave goodbye to her peers as she got into a taxi with Marge in order to spend the day shopping for a school uniform in the city?

As the letters exchanged between Carolina and Marge showed, these girls also acted as cultural brokers, communicating messages of respect or affection and requests for assistance between sponsor and family members. As implied above, I expect that this role gave the sponsored child a different kind of voice within their family structures, though I did not have data to confirm that suspicion. I did see evidence of jealousy within the community toward families who received special attention and gifts. This jealousy was mainly expressed as accusations that Nicaraguan staff at Manos por Dios used arbitrary rules to turn away American donors eager to adopt families that did not yet have sponsors.

What of the future and long-term consequences of such differential treatment? The literature on poverty and childhood aspirations and achievement offers a few hypotheses. Parental attention and investment has long been associated with educational aspirations and achievement.[8] The sponsored girls I met were proud of the attention they received, and they wanted to do their sponsors proud by having high aspirations. They did not just want to finish high school; they wanted to become doctors or translators or teachers, jobs requiring a college education.

[8] Sewell and Shah, "Social Class, Parental Encouragement, and Educational Aspirations."

Sociologist Margaret Frye studies the educational aspirations of girls in Malawi. As in Nicaragua, Malawian girls expressed ambitious career goals with little rational expectation for achieving these goals. Frye argues that the act of naming and pursuing lofty academic goals is a way of asserting a virtuous identity of one who strives for self-improvement. Staying in school requires other characteristics that are considered as virtuous: the discipline to work hard, delay gratification, and resist temptation.[9]

In the Nicaraguan context, North American sponsors played a supporting role in efforts that girls made to maintain a virtuous identity. First, sponsors directly endorsed the idea that education was the means to a new and better future. Second, their presence in the lives of girls publicly affirmed the special moral identity of the girls to their family and neighbors. Finally, the actual resources of a sponsorship, which went beyond bus fare, books, and uniforms to include advice and encouragement, gave girls an edge over non-sponsored peers. Those with the support of sponsors might receive extra resources to stay in school despite challenges such as family illnesses, the need to balance employment and homework, the temptation of boyfriends, and rigorous university entrance exams.

The impact of a high school or college education on women's lives is well-documented. In Nicaragua as in many other countries, women with higher education are more likely to marry and have children later in life. Education is no guarantee of employment in Nicaragua, but better educated parents are more likely to aspire to have high-achieving children.

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[9] Frye, "Bright Futures."

In Santa Inés, a meaningful minority of teen girls were being cultivated to value education, to aspire to achieve a better standard of living, and to form new families that would do likewise. And in this same community, volunteer tourists praised and took delight in the spirited personalities of 10-12 year old boys but more or less wrote off 14-20 year old men as hopelessly irresponsible, saying it was "too late" to change them.

Both boys and girls were receiving foreign aid, and many had supportive parents who pushed them to stay in school. The fraction of girls who connected to long-time sponsors was small. Yet the philosophy behind these personalized approaches to social transformation was based on the idea that small-scale impacts matter. Travelers hoped to invest in the next generation of leaders. As with Marge and Carolina, they imagined the impacts of their investment in these individuals would ripple out into the community. Travelers invested gifts and time in children with special potential precisely because they believed this small, elite cohort was the best chance to jumpstart a cycle of intergenerational transmission of values such as self-esteem, educational attainment, virtuous adulthood, and personal empowerment.

Boys were encouraged to trust their own creative and entrepreneurial instincts and to think of themselves as leaders. They received more attention and gifts in the short term than girls did. Boys who tested the boundaries of "good" behavior by cajoling travelers away from work, finagling cash or presents, or even stealing received the most positive reinforcement in terms of attention and interventions from travelers. As groups of travelers cycled in and out of these boys' communities (over thirty groups every year), boys honed their skills at soliciting material and emotional support. However, these skills were not effective at maintaining long-term interest and investment on the part of travelers. Travelers rewarded initiative and ingenuity but provided few

incentives or support structures for boys who hoped to pair such initiative with the skills, discipline, or knowledge necessary for a sustainable livelihood.

In contrast, travelers strongly encouraged girls to measure their success in terms of educational attainment. In some cases, they provided material and emotional support to help girls stay in school at least through high school. The long-term nature of such educational sponsorships necessarily drew travelers into a broader circle of social influence that encompassed the families and even the friends and neighbors of sponsored girls. Potentially girls with sponsors could take on new and powerful roles within their family structures as brokers of the cultural and material resources that sponsors had to offer. They also may have altered aspirations for themselves and for their future romantic partners. An unintended consequence of ambitious aspirations, however, is that finding romantic partners with whom to share one's aspirations and household responsibilities may become increasingly difficult as boys and girls mature into men and women with different educational advantages.

Only time will tell what the impact of these sponsorships will be in Santa Inés. However, it is clear that an episodic orientation that urges travelers to approach poverty alleviation through an individual, case-by-case approach has resulted in systematically different treatment for boys and girls in the community. At least in part, these differences arise from a desire to correct gender inequalities in developing communities. Yet the outcomes here suggest that the concern of international development organizations for gender inequality leads to action not toward equality of opportunity but toward a restructured gender stratification. Put another way, while girls benefit markedly from the sustained attention of foreign sponsors, volunteer tourists may exacerbate a trend of underachieving males in impoverished communities.

Chapter Six: Partners in Solidarity

Like Manos por Dios travelers, Partners in Solidarity travelers found themselves connecting to particular Nicaraguan individuals. Some of the needs or desires these new friends talked about would be easy for American travelers to fill. Bubbly Leonora, who laughed, teased, and hugged each traveler, trekked over seven kilometers to put breakfast on the table for the *cheles* (white people) by 6:30 each morning. A bicycle would mean she would not have to rely on expensive and erratic bus services or walk home in the dark each evening. A woman named Gloriana invited the cheles into her sparse home and in the course of conversation mentioned that her bean crop had failed. In 2009, *El Niño* weather patterns brought draught to this subsistence farming community. A three-month supply of dried beans to supplement her rice stores would have dramatically changed Gloriana's nutritional intake. If she had corn tortillas to serve with her *gallo pinto* (a fried mixture of rice and beans), she would have a complete protein and the staples of a sustaining if unbalanced diet.

Partners in Solidarity travelers wanted to help their new friends, but they also wanted to act within the bounds of certain convictions absorbed through association with the organization that sponsored their travel. Partners in Solidarity presented a compelling vision of transformation. It distinguished between charity – a temporary action controlled by the giver – and solidarity – supporting Nicaraguans as they identified and pursued their own dreams for their community. Direct assistance of individuals was seen as charity and counterproductive to the goal of empowered Nicaraguan communities. Still, there was a difference between believing community-

wide interventions were best and witnessing firsthand the slow, uneven progress or failures of a particular project. Clean water for twelve hundred might have seemed to be a larger success than helping one person. When Partners in Solidarity travelers got to know the personal stories of individuals – "making their struggles and joys your own" as the website encouraged – the joy of that success was tempered with concern for those who fell through the cracks. Clean water in fourteen months would not alleviate the suffering of Daniel and his children, who struggled with parasites on a daily basis.

This chapter follows United Church, a Partners in Solidarity congregation in Kansas, and its engagement with Aldeas Cafés, a coffee-farming community in the north-central region of Nicaragua. In particular, I follow the team's relationship with Jessica, a resident of that community who was twelve when she met the group in 2008. The team had to make difficult choices as members grew more invested in Jessica, in her community, and in the vision of Partners in Solidarity. Travelers weighed competing notions of right action: to help a bright, promising individual or to aim for a larger goal and possibly let her slip through the cracks. The first half of the chapter follows the team's deliberations as they channeled their interest in helping Jessica into an ambitious plan to bring a high school to Aldeas Cafés. The plan operated precisely as Partners in Solidarity hoped a partner project would: personal connections with local people inspired the team to think about a particular need, while actions emerged from a combination of listening to local histories, consulting Nicaraguan leaders, and reflecting carefully together about the future.

Then at the beginning of the new school year, Jessica faced a crisis. The team acted to intervene. Sarah described this intervention as a necessary violation of the principles of Partners in Solidarity. The second half of this chapter examines how Sarah

and various Partners in Solidarity participants, including Aldeas Cafés residents, reacted in the fallout of this supposed violation. In the gaps between stated moral principles, actions, and justifications, communities and individuals changed in unanticipated ways, exceeding some expectations and confounding others.

Partners in Solidarity and Aldeas Cafés

In 2008 a Nicaraguan non-profit organization that I call La Fundación invited Sarah to consider a new partnership. On the principle that happy, healthy workers are loyal, productive workers, the owners of a coffee plantation hired La Fundación to provide technical assistance and development programs to its workers and the surrounding community. The plantation and the community shared a name – Aldeas Cafés – and a complex, symbiotic history. During the Sandinista administration in the 1980s, the land was confiscated and converted into a state-run farm. In 1990 Violeta Chamorro was elected president and quickly reversed many Sandinista policies, including agrarian reform. Confiscated land was to be returned to its previous owners.

On the land that would become Aldeas Cafés, passionate Sandinista supporters who had fought in the war did not take this news lying down. In 2009 the plantation foreman who had been there recounted his tale for a rapt audience of *Norte Americanos.* In the mid-1990s, he and compatriots met government agents at the farm's gates with guns in hand and refused to leave. The government agents negotiated. They offered the farmers a chance to raise the money to buy the farm as a co-operative. However, financial mismanagement and embezzlement stripped the group of their savings, and they were in danger of losing the farm.

Instead of giving up, the community chose to compromise. They tracked down a previous owner, Reyes, and asked him to buy back the land instead. When Sarah told this story, she explained their decision in this way: "They are practiced here with the patron-client culture, which means the landowner holds it, and he takes care of his workers much like a king. And they knew him. They knew his patterns. He wasn't a wonderful *dueño* (landlord/master). But he was better than a lot of them."

The farmers went back to Reyes, the man they knew, and convinced him to return. They also successfully negotiated an agreement that would guarantee their livelihoods. Reyes agreed that each of the 87 families involved would receive 3 *manzanas* (the equivalent of about 5 acres), and the head of the household would have a job at the coffee farm for life. Aldeas Cafés was chosen as the name of both the coffee plantation and the adjacent town created from the manzanas ceded to the 87 families.

Aldeas Cafés presented a new opportunity for Partners in Solidarity. The organization's prior work was limited to the community of Comarco Este, which had a reputation for strong leadership, a prolific history of soliciting foreign aid, a background in hosting volunteers from the Peace Corps and the sisters of Maryknoll, and a good track record of coordinating with aid groups from a variety of countries, including the U.S., Austria, Iran, and Venezuela. Aldeas Cafés had no such connections. At Aldeas Cafés, contact with foreigners was more limited. In the mid-2000s Reyes took on a business partner from the U.S.; this man took charge of operations after Reyes passed away in 2009. Some residents also received remittances from relatives working in Honduras, Costa Rica, and the U.S., but in general Aldeas Cafés received little foreign investment. As a potential Partners in Solidarity community, Aldeas Cafés presented many possibilities for starting fresh and building cross-national relationships from the

ground up. The story of the men meeting the government agents at the gate with guns also appealed to Sarah's radical sensibilities. Their negotiation for land and independence from the returning dueño suggested their ambition and potential for self-governance.

She also worried about how deeply community structures were embedded in the farm's operations. The town was a discontinuous piece of land that bordered the plantation to the west but also included the manzanas deeded to various families, which were plots of land scattered throughout the plantation. Prestigious plantation employees including the foreman and the company nurse were involved in the political leadership in the community. The farm clinic served the local population, and the elementary school was on farm property. Those who were not employed by the farm directly often supplemented their subsistence farming by selling or trading food and services to farm employees.

A group of church leaders scouting out sites for future trips was so turned off by the vibe of the community as a "company town" that they left after just one night. However, Bob Howe, the pastor of United Church in Kansas, decided to give the community another try, and his congregation's first trip took place in 2008.

The Team from United Church

Bob Howe described his Kansas community as "a little blue town in a big red state." He told me the town of about 2,000 residents was growing at a 7-9 percent rate annually, bringing in mostly young families who worked in Wichita or in the excellent local school system. A significant minority worked in agriculture. Affiliated with the

United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, he maintained that his was by far the most liberal congregation in the community.

For a town this small, United Church was a large and thriving congregation with outreach programs in local, national, and international contexts. When I visited in the spring of 2010, four of eight Sunday School classrooms were under renovation for use as a Headstart early childhood learning center. In the pastor's office, a stack of five suitcases was piled along one wall next to boxes of clothing. I asked if they were destined for Nicaragua. "Colorado," Bob explained. He enthusiastically described the church's longstanding relationship with a children's home for at-risk youth in Colorado. The home was United's flagship mission project with as many as four mission teams traveling there annually. Nicaragua was a newer ministry, and only a few members of the church had embraced it wholeheartedly. Bob's enthusiasm went a long way, though; he claimed to bring up the country or stories about specific people nearly every week. On his desk was a digital picture frame with familiar photos, including some I'd taken myself ten months before. I noticed the background image on his computer screen was a photo of Jessica and her sister.

In July 2009 I met the United Church team at the Managua airport. There were nine in the group, including three first-timers, Sarah, and me. Four were from United Church: Bob, Kevin, and married couple Cathy and Jim. Miguel, a Puerto Rican pastor of a small Wichita congregation, was joining the team for the second time. As the pastor of a small and financially insecure congregation, Miguel saw these trips as an opportunity to collaborate on a project with a scope that was otherwise beyond his congregation's means. His fluent Spanish was a welcome addition to the team.

When Sarah gave an inspiring sermon in another church in rural Kansas, the congregation recruited Josh to explore mission opportunities in Nicaragua. A carpenter who had designed and built his own home, Josh taught vocational courses in construction at a local high school. Josh's son Jason was in his early 20s and was motivated more by the desire to volunteer than by any religious implications of the trip. A line cook in a restaurant, he told me the "kitchen Spanish" he used with immigrant co-workers came in handy on the Nicaraguan work site. He was used to collaborating on a task by using expressive gestures and a few key words. Josh and Jason were excited to share their first volunteer trip together.

Each team that traveled with Partners in Solidarity started out with a different mix of experience, expectations, and facility with progressive discourses of solidarity and partnership. At United Church, Pastor Bob was an enthusiastic early adopter of the idea that partner trips should be about something more than helping poor Nicaraguans. An amateur social theorist, Bob frequently referenced books such as Jeffrey Sach's *Common Wealth* and Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin's *Three Cups of Tea*. He believed *mission* was ultimately about spreading justice in the world and that mission trips should change both those who travel and those who host travelers.[1] Sarah's vision of creating new models of international engagement captivated his imagination. He chose to work in Aldeas Cafés in large part because it felt like a clean slate and a chance

[1] This definition of mission reflects Bob Howe's progressive and pluralist theology. Rather than spreading a Christian faith, he describes himself as spreading Christ-like behavior, which he names as working for social justice. While Howe's understanding of the meaning of travel could be called a *narrative of mission*, it bears little resemblance to the narrative of mission Brian Howell extrapolates from the Evangelical subjects in his research.

for a social experiment where mission could be about justice instead of charity and about transforming both his congregation in the U.S. and that village in Nicaragua.

Bob's team members shared his enthusiasm if not his vision. They had what Sarah would characterize as a more conventional view of volunteer travel. They wanted to help. First-time traveler Kevin, an energetic doctor in his late 30s, told me "it's a good cause. It sounds like they're in need of just some basic stuff we take for granted: housing materials, clothing." Kevin had time, energy, and resources to offer, and he trusted his pastor when Bob said Nicaragua was a worthwhile place to volunteer those resources.

The team started out with a focus on volunteering rather than development. However, their collective experience with physical labor and community planning lent itself well to Sarah's vision for long-term transformation in Aldeas Cafés. Josh, Kevin, Jason, and Jim had all done construction work before, either as a summer job or helping out on the family farm. As a city administrator, Jim had expertise and interest in large-scale projects like the clean water system and the organization of community leadership more generally. Josh served on his town council. Doctor Kevin dreamed big and thought strategically, whether plotting the removal of an enormous boulder at the work site or contemplating unemployment or women's health issues in the community.

Overall, the team members had tremendous enthusiasm for the daily physical tasks of mixing concrete, leveling dirt floors, and standing on precarious tables to secure tin metal roofing. They were equally eager to dream up plans for sustainable development programs. Sarah both encouraged and moderated their conversations about transforming Aldeas Cafés, walking a line between encouraging the team's big ideas for future projects and reminding them of the need to involve Nicaraguans in identifying and planning future goals.

An Unexpected Encounter

The Kansas-based team arrived in Aldeas Cafés in 2009 with three goals: to formalize their partnership, to build a house, and to further plans to bring potable water to the community. Over the course of the week, their encounters with then 12-year old Jessica blossomed into a commitment to bring a high school to Aldeas Cafés as well. The plan for a high school emerged through an interplay of travelers' emotional investment in Jessica, their principled commitment to investing in communities rather than individuals, and the guiding voices of Sarah and La Fundación. The story illustrates how travelers calculated the impact of their actions and weighed the relative merits of immediate or long-term outcomes and of individual or collective interventions. In the case of a high school for Aldeas Cafés, those calculations did precisely what Partners in Solidarity aimed to accomplish. By prioritizing community interventions over personal ones, the team and community acted swiftly to install an ambitious program that had seemed out of reach prior to travel.

Soon after the team arrived in Aldeas Cafés on Saturday afternoon, they learned that one of the girls they bonded with the previous year no longer lived in the community. Her mother's partner lost his job with the coffee plantation, and they had to leave the small apartment provided for coffee workers. The news particularly upset Cathy, who confided in me during a pre-travel interview that her "fear is that the children that we made friends with may not be there…. I worry about where they're at and what they're doing. There's no way to ever track them down."

That afternoon Cathy and Jim shared stories about Jessica, her sister Mara, and their dog Lassie, a nearly skeletal mutt bearing little resemblance to his famous

namesake. "Jessica was our buddy," Cathy said. Miguel agreed, "She was the first one that greeted us."

At dinner that night, the team passed around the salad and *gallo pinto* (a common local dish of fried rice, beans, and spices). People made faces at the children who sat outside the open-air dining room patiently waiting for their gringo friends to come out and play. Suddenly Pastor Bob shouted "Oh!" and jumped from his chair to run toward a girl who approached on the path.

Mystified, the first-time travelers watched as Cathy, too, jumped up. "Oh, Jessica!" she gasped. "Oh, my gosh. Someone must have told her we were here. I'm so glad she's ok." The next few moments were a chaotic mix of hugs, tears, and rapid-fire questions. Eventually, the team learned Jessica's mother had moved the family in to an uncle's home in the outskirts of town when her *compañero* (partner) lost his job and therefore lost their farm-provided housing. As Cathy and Bob would later learn, the uncle's house was a *champa*, a roughly built tent or hut with sheets of plastic serving as one wall.

More than her living situation had changed for Jessica. She stood wrapped in Cathy's arms, her fingers sifting affectionately through Cathy's short, blonde hair as she admitted that she no longer attended school. After graduating from the local elementary school, fourteen-year-old Jessica was stuck. The community of Aldeas Cafés had no high school. Locals had to take a costly forty-minute bus ride to the city to attend a public high school on the weekends or pay tuition for a daily private school five km away.

The news that Jessica was not in school provoked dismay and an immediate discussion of the educational challenges facing Aldeas Cafés. While Jessica stood in Cathy's arms quietly updating Miguel on her life, the rest of the team volleyed Sarah

with questions. She explained to the best of her knowledge the challenges of getting a high school education in Nicaragua.

"I'm so sad she can't go to school," Cathy sighed. Kevin said, "That's really fixable. It's gotta be." Sarah agreed. Team members asked about the costs of sending an individual to school. She responded but then threw out another idea: "I almost think the other thing to work on, the other alternative is to work on getting a high school here." I had first heard Sarah mention the idea of a high school three months before, during my first visit to Aldeas Cafés. Jessica's dilemma gave her a chance to plant the seed of an idea in the minds of travelers before the conversation turned back to Jessica's life, and Miguel translated as she described what had happened since the last visit from her friends from Kansas.

An Opportunity to Ponder

Jessica had a compelling need, and the United Church team had the means to fill that need. Like many travelers in their situation, they were also uncertain how best to do so. In religious volunteer travel, there are many sources of uncertainty about how to behave. In Chapter Five for example, I described situations where Manos por Dios took a hands-off approach to guiding traveler interactions with children. In the absence of strong oversight, travelers intervened in children's lives following gendered patterns of interaction. In other cases, organizations did have rules for behavior, but those rules felt arbitrary to travelers faced with emotional decisions to make.

Partners in Solidarity's rules for dealing with a need like Jessica's were both clear and non-arbitrary to the travelers from Kansas. They agreed in principle with

Sarah's conviction that helping individuals could circumvent the work they wanted to do at the community level. In theory, U.S. and Nicaraguan partners must both agree to particular projects, though U.S. partners were asked to defer to local leadership structures in prioritizing community needs. Once a project was agreed upon, local leaders decided how to roll out the benefits, from who got a house first to the order in which pipes would be laid for a clean water system. I saw individuals appeal directly to Sarah or a team member for assistance on each of my trips. The standard response was to encourage speakers to bring those requests directly to local leaders.

As I discovered, Sarah had several strategies for transforming the pet passions of travelers into viable Partners in Solidarity projects. Consider the examples that opened this chapter. An anonymous donation to the leadership committee from a concerned traveler found its way to Gloriana to pay for beans. The cook without reliable transportation was one of several community leaders in a similar puzzle. Sarah raised funds to get bikes for the eleven community leaders with the farthest commutes to the weekly Tuesday morning meetings. Manos por Dios, which also worked in Comarco Este from time to time, donated thirty more to local high school students.[2] A solution similar to these two might be workable in Aldeas Cafés, though such a workaround could be risky in a community where the "local leadership" partners were new to the concept of community organizing and already deeply dependent on two institutions (the plantation and La Fundación).

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[2] In the field, I made no secret of my ties to both Partners in Solidarity and Manos por Dios. Since they worked in the same region, they were aware of one another. Both executive directors respected each other's work, though they had critiques for other religious organizations in the region. While I sometimes shared information about the latest projects, I had no part in this collaboration on the efforts to acquire bicycles.

Collaborative Problem Solving

In Chapter Four, I described two very different methods for keeping travelers informed about emergent situations. Manos por Dios staff cultivated a sense of living in the present moment by keeping travelers away from the "backstage" work of planning projects and of responding to unexpected delays or equipment failure. The back stage was front and center at Partners in Solidarity, where Sarah brought travelers into the planning directly. This was true when the trouble was as simple as a flat tire or as complex as a local community leader appropriating development funds for a personal project. By actively including team members in resolving small-scale decisions such as grocery shopping, Sarah opened the door for their initiative in addressing larger concerns such as education in Aldeas Cafés.

The team's first idea involved *becas* (scholarships). Pastor Bob explained his plan to me during a break from digging trenches on Tuesday morning. He knew about the beca program at Comarco Este from his first trip with Partners in Solidarity. "They give scholarships," he explained, "but there's a string attached…. For example if someone wants to be a doctor, they will pay for this as long as you come back and work in the community."

Bob was sure that he could "find a donor in seconds," but he wanted to know that Jessica had "a vision for something greater." He explained, "If in life her mission is to get married at age fourteen and have a bunch of kids, well, you know, maybe we'll be sad about that, but we want somebody to use that money elsewhere." Unlike his Manos por Dios counterparts, Bob did not see it as his place to exhort Jessica to value education

and career over family. However, he agreed with them that education and career would be the more desirable path for both Jessica and the community she might one day serve.

Bob recruited me to help him interview several children about their ambitions, hoping Jessica would not appear singled out. At the time, I inferred that this request was not just a way to camouflage the group's interest in Jessica. I believed Bob hoped to identify other bright, deserving, and ambitious scholarship candidates as well. By the end of the day, our halting conversations revealed that Jessica wanted to go to college and learn English. Others had ambitions to become doctors, licensed professionals, and even the president of Nicaragua, though this was said in a teasing tone. The team was floored by the aspirations of children who had little chance of attending high school.

The meeting on the porch that evening moved quickly past spiritual and personal reflection to a practical discussion about education in Aldeas Cafés. It began with Jessica and the question of scholarships. Pastor Bob struggled to articulate the tension he felt between wanting Jessica specifically to succeed and acknowledging the problems inherent in singling out a particular person for aid. He argued, "Jessica is in many ways our symbol. We got to know and love her and she can't go to high school, and we'd like for that to happen. So without violating… well, it's opening a can of worms because that's one kid that's gotten close to us." He did not want aid decisions to be made based on "who is close to the Americans" instead of being made based on the decisions of community leaders.

Sarah suggested that thinking in terms of sponsoring 20 scholarships instead of just one would help balance the team's desire to help Jessica and to help with education more generally. As she explained the structure of the beca program in Comarco Este, the discussion became more general. Team members wanted to know how much a

scholarship would cost for one year, which were the best schools in nearby communities, and how they could find out which teens in Aldeas Cafés would take full advantage of a high school scholarship. They began to ask questions about health care, vocational learning, and the already-existing housing and water projects, thinking about how education fit into a larger picture of economic development for the community. "What is the priority?" they wanted to know. "I think it would be important to hear them talk about that," Sarah replied. Murmurs of agreement came from the group. "We need to hear about their wants and needs," Jim said. The group agreed to raise the question of education with the local community leaders and see what they had to say.

From Scholarships to a High School

In the next twenty-four hours, a tentative plan to provide scholarships for a few students transformed into a public declaration that the U.S. citizens wanted to help Aldeas Cafés launch a high school in the town. Sarah and the director of La Fundación, Antonio, spearheaded this transition. Their combined experience, passion, and knowledge of the regional political, economic, and educational contexts quickly convinced the relevant stakeholders. The community leaders who would run the school and the team from United Church who would have to raise the money back home were all on board with the plan.

As the team worked on the week's construction project, which was the first house Partners in Solidarity would build in Aldeas Cafés, I sat in on a meeting between Sarah, her Nicaraguan Director of Operations, and two staff of La Fundación. Twenty minutes into the hour-and-a-half meeting, Sarah raised the question of education. She

set forth the team's practical questions about the community's demographics, their logistical questions about a scholarship program, and their desire to talk to some local leaders about what would be best. "Would it be best to hire a public school teacher and do a school in the afternoon so they could have a high school here? Or would it be better to pay scholarships so that they could go to school somewhere else?"

The team had not used the word high school since Sarah had mentioned the possibility on Sunday evening. Sarah herself put it back on the table and asked Antonio to share his thoughts about the community's options. For the next ten minutes, they discussed practical considerations. Antonio estimated that Aldeas Cafés had about 300 people between 15 and 21 years old. About 10 percent attended high school and an additional 10-20 percent would like the opportunity to do so. He also named three other communities in the area that might benefit from a school nearby. Sarah asked pointed questions about how a school might work: How many schools existed in the region? What did they cost? Which community leaders and government officials would need to be consulted about their plans? Antonio elaborated on the policies of the local municipal government when it came to outside groups building and funding schools. He suggested a few locations on the coffee plantation that could serve as classrooms. That way, the school could open without delay and donations could pay for teachers rather than infrastructure. He ultimately advised, "My opinion is to try harder to see if we can have the secondary school here…. We have to convince the mayor and the Ministry of Education to participate." Of the seventeen minutes they spent talking about education, about a minute and a half of the time was devoted to the idea of a scholarship program.

Plans moved swiftly from that point. Sometime during that day Sarah, Antonio and team representative Jim had a meeting about the water project with the mayor of

Matagalpa, the county in which Aldeas Cafés was located. While there, they dropped in on the minister of education for an informal chat. Antonio had the kinds of political connections that made such a drop-by feasible, especially when backed by the potential for charitable funding from the U.S.

The team and community leaders signed their formal partnership agreement that evening. At the close of the event, Sarah announced that the team had a special interest in education for high school students. She explained, "We're hoping to meet with your education commission and with a representative of the government to talk about how to get a high school in your community. So we want to talk to your leaders about how to make that happen. You need a high school here."

To me, it seemed that an announcement was premature. I thought Sarah had acted unilaterally without the input of local leaders. This was my second trip with Partners in Solidarity, and I had yet to witness the ways in which ideas that percolated slowly during time apart erupted into swift and decisive action during the brief days Sarah and U.S. partners spent in Nicaraguan community. I had forgotten that three months before, in a women's meeting in the Aldeas Cafés preschool, I had listened to the mothers speak passionately about improving the community's schools. I also underestimated Sarah's intuition and experience and the power of Antonio's silent, approving presence. A brief silence followed her words, and in that silence two local women looked at each other. Mirrored smiles appeared on their faces as the gathered crowd burst into applause. In the reflective discussion of the team later that night, a similar sense of excitement hung in the air. The team was focused on the excitement and opportunities their new partnership would afford. When they spoke of education, they talked about how the eyes of local parents lit up at the words high school: "They

were really ready to sign up!" The team's desire to help a few girls go to school had turned into enthusiasm for the realization of the "dreams and hopes" of an entire community.

The practical planning began the very next morning. Team and community leaders met with Sarah, Antonio, and two representatives of the local government. The government officials were there to talk about implementing a clean water project in the community, but the group spoke as well about the desire for a high school. Each potential stakeholder in the project had a chance to speak. Antonio took the lead, passionately describing the merits of hiring teachers instead of handing out individual scholarships. "This is just my individual position and on behalf of La Fundación," he said, "but just giving scholarships, probably what we're doing is redistributing poverty." Interestingly, the concrete examples he offered raised the bogeyman of teen pregnancy: if a girl fell pregnant or a family member became ill and needed care, she would most likely drop out and any scholarship money would be wasted. Since many students who began high school did not finish, Antonio argued, scholarships were an inefficient way to raise a community's prospects.

Two local elementary school teachers stood up and affirmed their desire to have a high school. After some nuts and bolts conversation about the cost of teachers and after some political grandstanding, the government officials assured the community that they would support the idea of a public school if money could be found in the budget. The U.S. mission team floated the idea that they might be able to raise funds to hire two teachers for the next year so that students could begin at least the first year of high school immediately. Without the need to pay for a building, creating a high school

became a feasible alternative to scholarship programs. The community and the Kansas congregation had affirmed a common desire to start a high school as quickly as possible.

Was a School for Aldeas Cafés a School for Jessica?

In the midst of these official meetings, how did the specific hopes and concerns of the U.S. travelers for Jessica figure in? Individual team members had varying degrees of vested interest in Jessica and her family. Four people had only met her for the first time that trip, and those team members tended to speak about educational needs in the abstract throughout the week. Jessica was simply one of many children they had met who would benefit from educational opportunities, either through a high school or vocational training. Of the five people who had met her previously, two were deeply concerned about the welfare of Jessica and her family. Cathy was starting to see Jessica as a granddaughter and fiercely insisted that any educational aid the team offered would mean that Jessica in particular could go to school.

Bob struggled to temper his personal attachment with his role as leader of a congregation that had a corporate responsibility to the people of Aldeas Cafés. Twice he described Jessica as a symbol that sparked the team's efforts. He realized that the team's "desire to build a high school, whether Jessica or anybody else [was] involved in it," was linked to the fact that the team was "thinking about Jessica." He was deeply troubled by a fear that Jessica would not be able to attend. After a tearful goodbye with her family, he confided to me, "I think it's too late for her. Did you see her stomach? It's out a little bit. I think it's too late for her." While Sarah later suggested Bob's fears were the

terrified fantasy of a protective father figure, pregnancy at fourteen was not unusual in Aldeas Cafés.

Between July and January, a plan for the high school was developed through the joint efforts of Partners in Solidarity, La Fundación, politicians from Matagalpa, and Aldeas Cafés leaders. The burden of funding would gradually be transferred from U.S. sponsors to the municipal government. It was expected to cost United Church and other Partners in Solidarity sponsors $18,000 over three years. Needing time to raise such capital, United Church and Aldeas Cafés agreed to a stopgap measure. They would provide sixty-six one-year scholarships to enroll recent primary school graduates in the local private high school while the funding and logistics of a public school were hammered out. With this plan in place, the fundraising began in earnest.

On January 31, 2010, the subject line of Partners in Solidarity's biweekly email update read, "Let's send Jessica to school!" The email included three pictures of Jessica helping the team remodel a preschool in 2008. It described how she "worked as hard as any of the adults… always with a smile!"[3] Then came the pitch: this bright, industrious fourteen-year-old was stuck, unable to attend secondary school because her family could not afford it. The email implied Jessica would not have a future "UNLESS WE MAKE IT HAPPEN. $7 will send her to school for a month – $70 will buy her a year. But Hurry – school starts Monday, Feb 8th." Serving as the face of the campaign, Jessica was once again both the intended recipient and the symbol of the latest developments in the educational program of Aldeas Cafés.

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[3] Jessica was praised in much the same way Manos por Dios travelers praised girls: for her dedication and hard work. Travelers named hard work and cheerfulness as virtues they witnessed in many Nicaraguans, but they were more likely to use these words in reference to women.

From Triumph to Crisis

I returned to Nicaragua a month after receiving the email about fundraising for Jessica, eager to hear about her first month of school. I had a fleeting fear that Bob might be right. What if Jessica was pregnant? I dismissed the idea as idle, "worst-case-scenario" thinking. I knew I would not see Jessica that week since I was working with a different Partners in Solidarity team in a different community. So I asked Sarah about her, hoping my "worst case scenario" would be dismissed. Reality turned out to be worse. Jessica was missing. Sarah told me that Jessica had been sold.

When the Partners in Solidarity Board of Directors visited Aldeas Cafés in January 2010, they were told Jessica had been sent to work as a housekeeper in Managua. Fourteen-year-olds could work in Nicaragua, though legally they were supposed to have written parental consent and be restricted to thirty-hour work weeks. In interviews, I met women who traveled as teens to cities like Matagalpa, León, or Granada or even to other countries such as Honduras or Costa Rica. They worked far more than 30 hours each week and sent home what little remittances they could. Sarah was familiar with such practices and was sad but unsurprised to hear Jessica was sent away to work.

Bob Howe, a recent addition to the board, was not so acquiescent. He wanted more information, and the deeper he dug, the more suspicious he became. Jessica's mother and several other women clammed up or changed their stories. Eventually Bob and Sarah pieced together a story. Jessica's mother sent her to work in the home of a stranger, supposedly a single father with a young baby. The mother also claimed at one point that Jessica was living with an aunt. Sarah was sure that Jessica's mother had

received a cash payment for agreeing to send her daughter away. When the staff of La Fundación tried the multiple contact numbers left by Jessica's new employers, all were disconnected. To Antonio, the mother's shifting stories, the stonewalling silences of community members, the neighborhood where Jessica was taken, and the disconnected phone all pointed to sex trafficking.

Between 2005 and 2007, the Nicaraguan government identified 100 victims of sex and labor trafficking within its borders. Of the victims identified, 83 percent were Nicaraguan nationals, 83 percent were underage girls, and 78 percent were sex workers (as opposed to laborers). During the same time period, Nicaraguan nationals made up 14 percent of trafficking victims identified in El Salvador and 34 percent of victims identified in Guatemala.[4] Sex and labor traffickers moved people from rural communities and the Atlantic coast to the capital in Managua or southeastern tourist cities such as Granada and San Juan del Sur. Some victims of trafficking were sent to other countries in Central America and beyond. They were recruited with the promise of work and coerced into the sex trade. In Granada and San Juan del Sur, many of these individuals would be involved in the sex tourism industry. One Granada-based tourism expert estimated that 60 percent of unaccompanied male tourists came to the city specifically to buy sex.[5]

I found out about Jessica's disappearance in February 2010 while sitting in the back of a pickup truck bumping along a dirt road in Comarco Este. News of Jessica's disappearance shocked me. I struggled with how to process my confused reactions. Until that moment, Jessica had been just another girl that I had met. I knew she was

[4] Sarrica, Jandl, and Borneto, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*.
[5] Babb, *Tourism Encounter*.

special to Cathy and Bob, and I agreed that she deserved a shot at an education. But I had also worried about the favoritism she'd received. How did her sister feel about the special attention? What about other children? That day, those questions gave way to far uglier ones. I could not stop fearing the abuse Jessica might be facing at that moment. If she were a victim of sex trafficking, she could be anywhere in the world. If she were in fact in Managua with the man described, I thought bleakly, she was likely being abused. I painted a picture of this man as white, possibly a U.S. expatriate participating in the sex tourism industry.

I also chastised myself for these racing thoughts. Perhaps my fears were unfounded. Like Bob, I could be reacting like an overprotective parent. Perhaps the bogeyman of sex trafficking was masking a more mundane reality that the promise of a free education would not put food on the table. As the oldest child, perhaps Jessica just had to work.

Irresolute: Finding Meaning in the Unknown

My jumbled thoughts came out during the reflection time that evening. On previous trips, I carefully weighed what kinds of contributions to make during the evening reflection time. As a researcher, I wanted to avoid having too much influence on the meaning-making processes of others. Evening reflection was a prime time for that kind of discussion, as I discuss further in Chapter Eight. I also believed that articulating some of the questions in my field notes to the group at large could prompt rich dialogue. The questions I had were often already in the minds of travelers, and sharing my thoughts prompted others to share their own. However, I had none of these thoughts in

mind when it came my turn to talk that evening. The team I was with did not know Jessica or Aldeas Cafés. Bringing her story into the conversation would not bring out new meditations on familiar themes. But I was hurting, and in that moment the only thing I could think to do was what reflection time was built for: expressing my feelings and trying to make sense of them through conversation with others.

Talking about Jessica herself felt too raw. Instead, I did what Manos por Dios trained its travelers to do. I talked about how my proximity to her experience was affecting me. I talked about my fear that her story would dampen my own drive to participate in international outreach in the future. "I think I'm going to have a lot of conversations about cynicism and pessimism," I said. "It's a struggle. The statistics are overwhelming. But thinking about individuals breaks my heart. How do we be realistic but not cynical?"

Empathetically, a man replied, "This really brings the starfish story to life." A few travelers had at one point or another talked about the starfish story. In it, a child walks along a beach as the tide goes out. Hundreds of starfish are stranded on the shore. Every few steps, the child stops to pick up a starfish and toss it back into the water. A watching adult asks, "Why do you do that? It won't make a difference." The child calmly throws another starfish back into the sea and replies, "It made a difference to that one."

I have always disliked the starfish story. The point, I think, is that small actions matter even if they do not solve the larger problems of society. I became a sociologist because I have always been interested in these larger problems: Why are the starfish stranded on the beach in the first place? What can be done about it? Delving into academic literature on development work and post-colonial theological writings about mission, another question occurs to me. What if the child is solving a problem that never

existed? What if time on the sand is a routine and even a functional part of a starfish's existence? I was smugly sure that the starfish story was an example of what Sarah would call misplaced charity. Like other Partners in Solidarity travelers before me, I liked the idea of finding a more lasting alternative.

My emotional investment in Jessica's wellbeing shook that confidence. Turning to the man who spoke, I angrily replied, "But I don't want to just save a starfish. I want to save the starfish *and* the beach." I tried to think of another way to explain the conflict I perceived between my immediate desire to have Jessica be safe and my conviction that human trafficking was a problem best addressed structurally through legal leverage, international pressures, and increased gender equality across the globe. I remembered that earlier that week, a man had brought out a cool gadget: a detachable camera flash that allowed both the foreground and background of a photograph to be in focus. I continued, "It's like a camera lens. You only focus on one thing. The starfish or the beach. Unless you have a really special flash. And we haven't found that flash yet."

Another team member picked up the metaphor of a camera lens and took it in a different direction. As more people learned to "understand the world's situation through a wider lens," he suggested more people would work together toward a common project. We needed to move forward carefully in order to stay in sync. "Slow and steady," he advised. As these reflective conversations often went, the challenge had been raised and would be set aside for the moment. What kind of common project might capture a collective imagination was left unnamed. The question of what if anything could be done for Jessica was also left for another day.

In both organizations I traveled with, volunteer tourists wrestled with intractable problems. These were issues that development professionals and foreign

policy experts tackled daily, often making only imperceptible headway. Sometimes conversations about these problems happened on the bus or in the field between two or three individuals; sometimes they happened during group reflection times. As I will elaborate in Chapter Eight, the episodic and embedded orientations of teams shaped how people tried to make sense of exceedingly difficult problems.

That night I framed Jessica's circumstances as a personal challenge to me. Meeting her and hearing her story caused me to question my own assumptions about the need for international volunteers to avoid applying individual solutions to systemic injustices in the world. My choice to talk about her circumstances in terms of their impact on my own thoughts was not unusual for a Partners in Solidarity trip. Most travelers shared a variety of deeply personal insights at one point or another. However, it was also common for travelers to redirect one another's personal remarks into insights that better fit the Partners in Solidarity model of encounter. In my case, the fellow traveler who spoke of a "wider lens" did precisely this. He proffered an abstract vision of a long-term future in which cross-cultural encounters would bring more people into the circle of collective action. Justice and prosperity could be achieved through the common pursuit of a goal as yet unnamed.

Taking Action

When the February 2010 team left Nicaragua, La Fundación's executive director Antonio assured Sarah that he thought Jessica was still in the country, and he would continue to seek more information. Sarah was less sure. Like me, she wasn't sure what to think, sometimes convinced Jessica was "just" a live-in domestic – work Sarah

equated to slave labor – and other times certain Jessica had been whisked to another country, now a sex slave beyond anyone's reach. While Sarah trusted Antonio's expert knowledge, she also thought that in a hopeless situation, he might placate her to spare her from the ugly truth. Sarah and I returned to Aldeas Cafés a month later in mid-March. Inspired by the July trip, Josh's church was sending its own team. They would help build a house and launch a construction apprenticeship program. The hope was that local men could learn by doing, working on Partners in Solidarity houses under a master builder. They would gain marketable skills and after careful negotiation by La Fundación, the local government agreed to award the local men with appropriate credentials after a certain number of training hours.[6]

Between February and March of 2010, members and associates of Partners in Solidarity and La Fundación continued to think about how to act in response to Jessica's disappearance. At that time Sarah was at home in Oklahoma, and Bob, Cathy, and Jim were back in Kansas. Cathy and Jim were horrified that a mother could "sell her daughter," as they saw it. They briefly considered fighting to adopt Jessica's younger sister Mara, but that thought was more an emotional reaction than an active plan. Legally speaking, it was possible but extremely difficult for a non-citizen to adopt a Nicaraguan child, and Nicaraguan children with relatives willing to care for them were ineligible for international adoption.[7] Meanwhile, Antonio continued to investigate

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[6] The two organizations had different relationships with local government offices. Partners in Solidarity tried to work with the government on large-scale projects including sanitation, clean water, schools, and healthcare programs. Manos por Dios largely "worked around" a government its staff viewed as corrupt or ineffectual. Its school programs were an exception to their practice of avoiding government entanglements because the government required collaboration if the school were eventually to become part of the public education system.

[7] Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Intercountry Adoption."

Jessica's whereabouts and to let his Sandinista contacts know that an American church group was very interested in this girl.

When Josh's team returned to Aldeas Cafés in March 2010, Antonio reported over dinner on Sunday night that he had an address where Jessica might be found. He and Sarah considered their options. Sarah decided to go to Managua in person to try to speak with Jessica. She worried the thin veneer of a middle-aged white woman wanting to visit a teenage "friend" would backfire and that Jessica might be moved or hurt in retaliation. She also told Antonio that if she saw evidence that Jessica was being abused, she would not wait. She would do whatever it took to get her out that day.

Around the dinner table, conversations slowed as listeners caught on to the emotional intensity, complexity, and danger of the plan unfolding. The team came to Nicaragua focused on building a house, but they could not help being aware of the drama unfolding with Jessica. Plans were made and adapted each day. In the end, none of the plans were necessary. Antonio came to Sarah's casita on Tuesday evening as the group gathered for reflection time. He reported that Jessica had returned home. Sarah went to greet Jessica while the group continued its discussion. After expressing surprise about Jessica's sudden return, the group talked about the work they had accomplished and their plans for the next day. They unpacked a quote about poverty that led to a conversation comparing poverty in the U.S. and in Nicaragua. If any of them were suppressing wild curiosity about Jessica as I was, they said and did nothing to show it.

In the morning Jessica and her sister greeted the team, polite but subdued. I did not remember her as shy, and I wondered if her quietness was due to a harrowing experience or embarrassment at the attention. I later learned Jessica had not spoken a word about her experience to Sarah, instead repeating the bare bones of a story: I was

sent to Managua to work for my godmother. I helped around the house. When asked when she met this godmother, she responded, "When my mother took me to Managua." Bob Howe told me that even a year later she would speak openly and happily about any subject but this one. For Bob, her silence was evidence enough. He was convinced that something more traumatic than housework happened to Jessica in Managua.

If Antonio or Sarah made advanced plans for what to do in the unlikely event that Jessica came home, I never heard them. During the long, busy day that followed Jessica's return, Sarah told the team she had been convinced Jessica was "a lost child." She also confided to the church's pastor and me that she was "emotionally wrecked" and had been near breakdown a few times. These experiences suggested to me that what happened next for Jessica's family was a plan cobbled together that day. For Sarah, Bob, and Cathy, sending Jessica back to her uncle's house was untenable. Bob and Cathy blamed Jessica's mother. Sarah focused on the circumstances of an overcrowded house with underemployed adults. The casitas on the coffee plantation had vacancies, but they were reserved for plantation employees. La Fundación had the authority to hire and fire custodial and cooking staff but no funds to create a new position. In a tearful Skype conversation, Bob assured Sarah that his church or he, Cathy, and Jim would pay whatever it took to keep Jessica safe. La Fundación hired Jessica's mother for a position with duties to be determined later, and mother and three children moved in that day.

Reacting

From the moment that finding Jessica became a possibility again to the moment she returned to Aldeas Cafés, the ruminations about trust, about right action, and about

problematic interventions that characterized conversation on Partners in Solidarity trips were largely suspended. Those personally invested in Jessica's welfare asked not *whether* to act but *how.* The team from Josh's church worked on the house and spent evenings discussing big-picture questions. I joined them, but my thoughts were with Sarah and Antonio, and I was thinking in terms of the single starfish, not the whole beach. Partners in Solidarity's carefully cultivated embedded orientation to travel, that looks at long-term consequences and seeks to flesh out local context cues, took a back seat to action in the immediacy of crisis.

During a conversation with the pastor of Josh's church, I realized that I too had ceased asking *whether* to act. On Tuesday afternoon before we discovered that Jessica was already on her way home, Pastor David and I took a breather from carrying jugs of water from the river to a fifty-gallon drum at the build site, which was a short but hot and dusty five-minute walk each way. David spoke warmly of Sarah's vision for community transformation and reflected compassionately on the difficult decision she faced with Jessica. "It's hard to think about balancing helping one and helping many."

"This girl is so special," was my instinctive response. He reassured me, "I know, I know." Then he warned, "But it can't be that way in a church." My own words and his response struck me. For the first time, I was experiencing the kind of personal connection that I had witnessed in other travelers who felt compelled to make an exception to the general rule of not privileging individual needs over community goals and projects. Thinking about the many exceptions and about my own experiences in congregations in the U.S., I responded to David's claim that it *can't* be that way in churches. "We are always making exceptions," I protested. Exceptions seemed to be the rule.

"I know, I know," he replied. We continued to talk about the push and pull between wanting to foster an ethos of community and wanting to lift up and reward special gifts and talents. He looked over the house we were constructing and then across the street to where neighbors sat in their front yards watching the action from their houses, which also had leaky roofs and no way to secure their belongings with locked doors or windows.

David asked me, "So how do people across the street feel when they see a new house go up? What do you think?" The question flowed from our broader musings: when one person or one family visibly benefits from the work of the gringo mission teams, how does it impact the wider community?

"I've definitely heard a neighbor ask about getting a house for herself," I replied. I also knew that the first house Partners in Solidarity built in Aldeas Cafés had caused resentment. In the weeks between the lottery to choose a family that would receive the house and the team's arrival and groundbreaking, neighbors taunted the new owner by saying that the gringos would never come back to build. The homeowner said that he had attributed their reactions to jealousy and told us he tried to encourage them to participate in future housing lotteries.

Thinking back on my interviews with Nicaraguans, I added, "From what people are willing to share, it gives them hope that they might be next. It might be different in this community because there have only been two houses, but in the other community where they've been doing it for ten or fifteen years, there's a really clear sense that 'I could be one of those ones.'"

David appreciated my response. "That's what I wanted to know," he said. He did not come on this trip because he liked adventure or hard work. He was more of a hotel-

and-relaxation kind of traveler. He came because he wanted to understand whether Aldeas Cafés was a mission that he wanted to promote as a pastor of a small, rural church. He continued, "I want to go back and tell my members, 'Why would we go back a third year? Because there's expectations and hope and that's what we should be about.'" He added the caveat that his church should do "those things that we can afford to do."

As the week continued, Sarah spoke frankly to the team about how her actions failed to reflect Partners in Solidarity principles and about her concerns about possible negative consequences for Jessica and the young cross-national partnerships. Sarah raised these concerns during reflection on Wednesday night. Getting Jessica back was "amazing," Sarah shared, "but also, I had to compromise the core value of Partners in Solidarity in order to get her back." She laughed,

> You know, I was telling David today that Partners in Solidarity's core value is that we don't privilege individuals. You know, with opportunity. But the only way to get her back was to privilege her: to find a place to live for her and her family. And to get her mom a job. And we did that. And she's going to pay the price.

The idea that privileging individuals would have negative consequences was such a central premise to the Partners in Solidarity enterprise that no one questioned Sarah's claim or asked her what kind of price she meant. Instead, Jason reassured her that "sometimes that's what it takes."

Sarah agreed, "Values are never… you never get to live into them 100 percent. It's never black and white."

Jason's parents, both teachers, echoed the thoughts their pastor and I had about congregational life the day before. In a classroom, teachers try to make it "always the same for everybody," Josh explained, "Except it's not." His wife agreed, "There's always the individual story that has to be dealt with."

Sarah affirmed that despite the potential fallout, she would not change a thing about what she did because "Jessica's alive, and she's not in a prostitution ring. And she's going to school."

Jason suggested, "No matter how much you try to live by your ideals, you have to follow your heart. Go by what you feel like you really should do."

Sarah agreed, "And I did, but I also need to be able to name that." Murmurs of agreement filled the circle.

Another man spoke up for the first time that evening. He suggested that there was another way to look at this story. Sarah's actions did not just address a single person's experience of trafficking. They also addressed "a value that [the Partners in Solidarity teams] bring here. We say, 'It can't be that way.'" Partners in Solidarity could not intervene every time a girl was sent away, he continued, but it sent a powerful message about expectations for the partner community when "in the face of a particular circumstance, you say, 'It can't be that way.'"

Until that point, the group had weighed together the positive outcomes for Jessica against imagined collateral damage to her family and the community. This man's insight shifted the conversation to positive collateral consequences. Jessica's experience exposed to foreign visitors what Sarah called "an ugliness in the community that they're not very proud of." Over the previous month, conversations with community leaders revealed there was an unofficial system in the community where young women, usually a couple of years older than Jessica, were sent away for "domestic" work. A veneer of silence masked community-wide knowledge that sex work was likely involved in any hiring campaign that required only young, pretty girls to travel not to the nearest city

but to the capital or Honduras. With the secret exposed to the eyes of gringos, leaders in the community made promises to act.

Sarah hoped Aldeas Cafés was "getting real" about what problems were in their community. She hoped that by speaking about the enormity of the problem, they would be motivated to take more initiative in solving it and that they would know "they have the assets to fix this," to the extent that they would not have to "sit around waiting for someone to fix it for them." At the same time, she knew enough to understand that without some alternative form of family income, community leaders were making largely empty promises of change. Sarah saw a conversation about trafficking as an opportunity to accelerate another program that she had in mind for the community: women's microfinance.

After

A year later I spent two more weeks in Aldeas Cafés. Josh's church had returned with two newcomers from yet another church in Kansas that was interested in exploring the vision of mission that Partners in Solidarity promoted. Bob Howe was present for the trip. Sarah had invited him to facilitate the week for the group from Kansas while Sarah spent the week with an all-new group consisting of adults and undergraduate students from a college town in Iowa. Ever the consummate networker, Bob had ferreted out the latest changes in Aldeas Cafés by the time I had arrived.

The news about Jessica and her family was mixed. Her mother had lost the job on the farm. Bob was still angry, calling the mother useless and hinting that too many boyfriends in and out of the house had caused drama in the neighborhood. The

immediate family moved north, and Jessica found work as a housekeeper. This time, she worked by day but still lived with her family. She and her sister attended high school on the weekends, reportedly with perfect attendance and excellent grades. Being the primary breadwinner at the age of sixteen was not the life Bob or Cathy would have wanted for Jessica. Still, she was not living a dangerous, heartbreaking life of forced prostitution, nor was she in perpetual debt as a live-in domestic sending home remittances. She received wages for her hard work, supported her brothers and sisters, and pursued her dream of a high school education. Her brother and sister no longer lived on the mercies of an uncle with his own large family to feed. The move also assuaged Sarah's fears about the family's reception in the community. Away from Aldeas Cafés, there might be rumors about Jessica's past, but there was also a chance to escape from her history and her connection to U.S. patrons.

As for the community, development projects were thriving. The micro-finance program that Partners in Solidarity had sponsored was completing its first loan cycle and more than thirty women had received loans. One of these women was the person who facilitated Jessica's move to Managua as well as the "employment" of other girls in the community. "That's the wicked witch of the west," whispered a traveler from Arizona when her team visited the woman's house to learn more about her small business. The traveler later wondered aloud why Sarah would include such a person in the benefits of a loan program. Sarah reasoned, "You know, the reason she's doing it is she can't feed her grandkids. You have to provide alternatives." The explanation may have been emotionally unsatisfying, but it made practical sense. "If you can't beat 'em, pull 'em into your ring," one traveler remarked. "Keep your enemy close," her friend retorted. Including this woman in the micro-finance project was also a powerful

symbolic move for the community. The other women in the program knew who she was and how she had made money in the past. Her inclusion in the program could be an olive branch toward reconciliation between the Partners in Solidarity teams and Aldeas Cafés residents. It was also a reminder of the hope that the community could not only exist but also thrive without participation in human trafficking.

In the course of an hour-long conversation with two other loan recipients, the subject of trafficking was raised. While Sarah initiated the conversation, the younger woman readily picked up the thread. She informed us that a bus had come through town just two weeks before with men looking for girls to bring to Managua. She spoke quietly but firmly of her conviction that these kinds of predatory outsiders should no longer be welcome in the town. The woman had no formal role as a community leader, but she made a point of expressing her distaste to her neighbors. Sarah praised her and encouraged the two women to keep talking about it. To the whole group, she reported in English and Spanish that there was now a more active discussion of and resistance to the practice of trafficking in the community. She insisted, "We have to find a way for women to have choices and not just say, 'Shame, shame.'" In agreement, the two women from Aldeas Cafés nodded gravely.

Bob Howe would later make use of the story of the woman who saw the bus carrying men looking for girls. Bob wrote and delivered a compelling sermon about the progress made in Aldeas Cafés. He told the harrowing story of Jessica's abduction, the community's commitment to her rescue, and the grace conferred in her return. He turned the conversation with the two local into a litany. "Not in this village," it went. "Not in this village. Maybe they'll find some poor girl, but not in this village."

While the community's shared projects were thriving, the leadership council of Aldeas Cafés struggled with a sense of purpose after losing its most vocal member. José Luis, the plantation foreman who ran the council meetings, had been fired. Two years before, he had captivated me with stories of his role in turning away Chamorro's government agents in the 1980s. He claimed to work closely with the new U.S.-based co-owner who took over most business decisions when Reyes' health failed. In March 2011 José Lu had been let go and was making plans to leave the community to seek new work. Sarah hoped the power vacuum of his departure would make space for a new system of leadership that would be less dominated by the plantation's economic structures of patronage. To the assembled group, she spoke passionately about the difference between having a boss and having a leader. She encouraged them to take some time before electing a new head of council. She even suggested such a position might not be necessary to the work of the group.

The energy in the room was electric and filled with hope, though I also saw clear examples of community leaders pandering to Sarah as they would to the "boss," a scenario that she was urging them to eliminate. The presence of women in the circle was a direct response to Sarah's overt statements about the need for more women leaders. A suggestion by the (male) clinic nurse that the community create *anti-machismo* training courses for local men was likewise inspired by Sarah's statements about the need for more involvement of women. Still, the excitement in the group was contagious, and the Partners in Solidarity observers in the circle that night were optimistic about the possibilities opening up for the community. Sarah was less confident. "It's like they hit the restart button every time," she said. Sarah had hoped that the group would have become more self-reliant after three years of working with

Partners in Solidarity and an even longer period of time working with La Fundación staff who were a daily presence in the community. Instead, bank accounts were still controlled by La Fundación. While the high school, the clean water project, and other efforts in Aldeas Cafés were thriving, Sarah worried that this community still wanted a patron more than a partner. These concerns would be the next hurdle to tackle, and she was already brainstorming ways to do so.

In 2010 United Church and other Partners in Solidarity supporters raised about $5,000 to cover 67 high school scholarships. The high school that Jessica inspired in Aldeas Cafés opened in February 2011. The school was able to take over the existing building of a foreign-built private school with flagging attendance. United Church and the county government of Matagalpa each agreed to pay $6,000 toward teacher salaries. They hired eight teachers and enrolled 209 students. It was a weekend school rather than a daily one, meaning students attended once a week instead of Monday through Friday. This was a common practice in Nicaragua, but United Church and the head of the education committee at Aldeas Cafés, himself a private school teacher, had big plans for revamping the pedagogy and hopefully adding a Monday through Friday track one day.

Bob worried about how to find $6,000 each year for the next few years, but he trusted that the local government would eventually take over the costs of this now-public high school. The difference between his initial idea of scholarships and the resulting high school was striking. Scholarships would mean an annual outlay of $5,000 to support about 70 teens. The program would succeed or fail on the initiative and generosity of a small group of Kansas church-goers, most of whom would never have the motivation generated by meeting beneficiaries like Jessica. Bob knew his congregation would be unlikely to sustain that kind of investment for long.

In contrast, a three to five year capital fund drive was an ambitious but more palatable investment. The matching government funds had both ideological and practical appeal. From the perspective of a solidarity partnership, generating local ownership of the project from within Nicaragua was an important step toward the goals of community empowerment and self-governance. As community leaders worked with county officials on the high school and the clean water system, they gained valuable skills, networks, and confidence for initiating and overseeing future projects.

Generally, sharing the burden of funding means sharing accountability to the community. It is easy for foreign donors to abandon projects. I see evidence of this myself in many Nicaraguan communities and in U.S. congregations. Funding for infrastructure does not pay for maintenance, so a beautiful clinic shuts its doors for lack of medicine and a doctor's salary. When the most enthusiastic advocate for a project has a personal crisis or a pastor leaves a church, enthusiasm may fade. The receiving community has little recourse to hold international donors accountable to promises made. They have more recourse when elected officials become involved. Governments make empty promises or plead a lack of funding before a project begins; once it is in place, it becomes more difficult for officials to justify cutting off support.

Conclusion

"Best practices" at Partners in Solidarity acknowledged the power of interpersonal connections while attempting to channel that energy into collective actions. When it came to education in the community, the plan produced textbook results. Mothers in Aldeas Cafés confided their dreams for their children's success to

Sarah. It was a dream she already shared. The Kansas team had dreams for the community as well, but they were largely unformed until Bob and Cathy found Jessica as a focal point. With Jessica as both intended recipient and symbol of hope, a desire for education emerged in a rapidly accelerated plan to open a high school seven months after they reconnected with Jessica and first thought to tackle education in Aldeas Cafés.

According to Sarah and Bob, the next part of the story broke the rules. With Jessica in crisis, the team once again took rapid and decisive action. This time, those actions directly conflicted with the agreed-upon guidelines for embodying core values of mutuality, solidarity, sustainability, and collaboration. Yet within Partners in Solidarity's embedded orientation to travel lay the tools to repair and restore the identities of travelers as transnational partners despite this seeming failure. Travelers were trained to spin out the various mid- and long-term consequences of particular actions and to think in terms of collective rather than individual outcomes.

A year after Jessica came home again, the intervention that violated Partners in Solidarity's norms had markedly improved Jessica's life and the lives of her family members. As for the community of Aldeas Cafés, the action appeared to have had remarkably few of the negative impacts Sarah and the teams from Kansas feared. Instead, this personal intervention became the catalyst for two transnational initiatives: microfinance and a conversation on human trafficking. These conversations were shaped in part by the embedded orientation practices of Partners in Solidarity. Jessica's story was incorporated into the shared history of Aldeas Cafés and partner teams. This history shaped the kinds of questions travelers asked when they encountered community members, especially when they visited with women who had received microloans. The story also influenced conversations between local residents and

international visitors about their hopes for the future, from wanting more women in local leadership and growing the microloan bank to sending teen girls to high school and actively rejecting the outsiders who tried to entice families into sending their daughters away.

However, it cannot be said that an embedded orientation among the providers of international assistance was the silver bullet solution to problems of sustainability. The leadership council in Aldeas Cafés was not being transformed into the kind of assertive and self-motivated force that the pastoral committee in Comarco Este already was. Sarah's assertion that the leadership council was used to a patron was likely true. It was also likely the case that Sarah's strong personality and swift action on behalf of the community or on behalf of Jessica in particular encouraged local leaders to defer to her clear vision and her ability to make things happen quickly. No doubt, Partners in Solidarity would face perpetual tensions between wanting local Nicaraguans to lead and providing the kinds of direct technical assistance that these untrained community groups required in order to manage development programs. Still, the embedded approach equipped transnational partners to think deeply about how personal connections could fuel transnational cooperation and structural interventions. By bringing even the most personal stories into a history of transnational partnership, Partners in Solidarity's practices could change but its core values would remain an unchallenged beacon pointing toward a shared future.

Chapter Seven: Recipient Perspectives on Interpreting Aid

Many Nicaraguan beneficiaries of the aid volunteer travelers provided were newcomers to a transnational aid relationship. While some savvy recipients had procured multiple microloans or scholarships, more were receiving a scholarship, a house, or some other materially significant benefit for the first time. These recipients had little exposure to "episodic" and "embedded" ways of viewing aid which I described in Chapter Four. In this chapter, I set aside organizational orientations for a moment to examine the ways in which Nicaraguan aid recipients used their own local cultural resources to make sense of their experiences receiving support.

At the heart of this chapter lies a fundamental conflict within international humanitarian and development efforts. The desire to honor local wisdom and cultural practices often clashes with development industry ideals such as participation, empowerment, and sustainability. Nowhere is that tension more evident than in the reactions of organizations and volunteers to local manifestations of patron-clientelism, wherein a quid-pro-quo system of exchange reinforces status differences between wealthy, powerful patrons and less affluent, dependent clients. For volunteer tourists steeped in development terminology, a central measure of success is whether aid recipients assert personal agency. That is, do they claim to have taken deliberate action to change themselves or the world around them? Local models for responding to aid, such as patron-clientelism, may encourage recipients to downplay overt expressions of

agency. Doing so may cause volunteers and aid recipients to offer conflicting interpretations of a shared humanitarian encounter.

This chapter examines the concept of personal agency with respect to the Nicaraguans that I interviewed. I found that Nicaraguan responses to humanitarian aid conveyed moral identities that either erased or emphasized the personal agency of aid recipients. Sociologist Joan Walling argues that recipients of charity in the U.S. face a difficult moral bind. Accepting the support that they need means acknowledging that they are not self-sufficient.[1] In a cultural context that equates success with self-sufficiency, those who accept aid must construct alternate measures of moral worth. Walling argues that one important way U.S. aid recipients find self-worth is by framing aid as a gift that can be reciprocated either directly or by showing care for others. "Paying it forward" is a particularly effective strategy for signaling moral worth in the U.S., where altruistic care of strangers is widely valued.

As did the people Walling interviewed, the Nicaraguan citizens that I spent time with spoke of the houses, wells, scholarships, and trinkets offered by volunteer tourists as gifts. Both the Nicaraguans and the travelers thought that gratitude and a desire to "give back" were appropriate responses to aid. However, they came into a gift encounter with different cultural models for expressing gratitude or enacting reciprocity. I found that Nicaraguans most frequently used either patron-client language or religious language to contextualize aid encounters as fitting within familiar cultural models for enacting reciprocity with a wealthier partner. Both narrative frameworks challenged dominant models of international development.

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[1] Walling, "Power of Receiving."

This chapter begins by explaining how narratives about the personal agency of aid recipients serve as a proxy measure of success in international development and in humanitarian contact during religious volunteer tourism. I next look at the resources for constructing a moral identity that are available to the residents of the target Nicaraguan communities. As I argue below, a patronage model grounded in economic structures of debt peonage alienates volunteer tourists who witness recipient displays of passivity and helplessness. By placing travelers in the role of substitute patrons, these displays may also evoke uneasy feelings, especially in the context of a political history fraught with colonial domination.

In contrast I found Nicaraguan responses to aid that invoked the presence and will of God reminded travelers of the Christian identity that they shared with most Nicaraguans and thus reframed their definitions of traveler-resident relationships. By putting God in the mix, religious responses to giving restructured the unequal relationship between travelers and Nicaraguans. Through the shared practice of prayer, locals claimed a role for themselves as active seekers of aid and as people with something to offer in return for gifts: namely, prayer. However, this religious model also constrained the ambitions of aid recipients and limited the ways that they imagined themselves to be agents of their own empowerment.

Performing Personal Agency: A Means and an End for Economic Development

The importance of the personal agency of aid recipients to international development organizations and to volunteer tourists cannot be overstated. In a review of the literature on international development organizations, sociologists Watkins,

Swidler, and Hannan argue that the long-term and complex nature of development brings a great deal of uncertainty to day-to-day measures of programmatic success.[2] The connections between measurable methods, proximate outcomes, and long-term goals are unclear. In these large gaps between what is known and what is desired, buzzwords such as participation, empowerment, and sustainability become both the *means* of economic development and the measures of its success. Participation by locals in community projects is generally assumed to "empower" these locals, or build their capacity to make choices and take action toward a chosen goal.[3] Empowered locals are thought to have greater "ownership" or investment in a project. Ownership is thought to increase the likelihood that programs will be sustained after an initial burst of international interest and funding has faded.

The buzzwords of the international development industry have been adopted in both secular and religious volunteer tourism circles. Tourism studies expert Stephen Wearing argues that volunteering and other forms of alternative tourism are not niche markets but rather expressions of a philosophy of travel that take issues of "development and sustainability" into account.[4] This philosophy manifests itself in an array of preoccupations, including a search for "authentic" interaction with locals, a concern about environmental impact, a desire for "equal exchange" of ideas with locals, a goal of mutual learning, and a display of deference to local leadership in identifying volunteer projects. Locals who can present themselves as active change agents are

[2] Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan, "Outsourcing Social Transformation."
[3] Narayan, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*.
[4] Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism*.

exemplars for volunteers who want to move beyond the objectification of local residents toward encounters that are "authentic" or "empowering."

The historical ties between secular international development efforts and religious international outreach have shifted from mutual suspicion to tentative partnerships. Development experts Katharine Marshall and Marisa Van Saanen argue that secular and religious institutions share development goals but approach these goals with distinctive language and operating styles.[5] However, the organization staff and travelers that I interviewed mapped religious language onto secular development goals. They found commonalities while overlooking nuanced debates or critiques. For example, the Biblical injunction to be good stewards of the earth resonated with secular language about sustainable, environmentally conscious programs. Referring to aid recipients as "brothers and sisters in Christ" was one way for travelers to signal their desire to balance inequalities in power between donors and aid recipients. The volunteer travelers I interviewed mostly treated as interchangeable concepts such as Christian unity and empowered mutuality. Their temporary visa to the land of international development rarely required them to confront the tensions between religious and secular approaches to assistance that Marshall and Van Saanen describe.

Empowerment is a particularly potent imagined outcome of volunteer efforts for both volunteers and organizations that facilitate travel. In international development circles, evidence of empowerment often comes in the form of individual testimonials about how a person's life has changed after participation in a development program. These stories may have the flavor of a religious conversion. Researchers report that an

[5] Marshall and Van Saanen, *Development and Faith*.

HIV+ South African man declared "I am like a born again" after receiving anti-retroviral drugs; a Kenyan woman in a family planning program reported, "I would like to spread the gospel of tubal ligation to my friends and others."[6] In both of these examples speakers simultaneously stress the benefits of the intervention and their own active roles in taking full advantage of its promise. While promoting the program itself, the beneficiaries simultaneously put themselves forward as proactive and worthy recipients of aid, further cementing the program's empowering effects.

These narratives are presented to agency boards, written up in annual reports, and used in fundraising campaigns. They are compact and compelling stories with strong causal arguments and emotional impacts. As such, the narrative accounts recipients tell about aid can become more persuasive evidence of the positive impact of interventions than the actual behaviors of aid recipients. I describe below how in the case of the Nicaraguans that I interviewed, stories they told about receiving did not always match their actions of seeking to initiate or further aid encounters.

As I described in Chapter Four, storytelling was a central mechanism that organizations and travelers used to make sense out of their humanitarian encounters. Travelers and staff told stories, but they also sought out Nicaraguan stories of success. Manos por Dios staff always brought teams to visit the owner of "Miracle Bakery," who once lived by the town dump and now employed three neighbors in a thriving business. Partners in Solidarity director Sarah took teams to visit micro-loan recipients. Once the group asked the owner of a *pulperia* (small general store) to re-enact the story she had just told so that it could be filmed for the organization's website. These experiences left

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[6] Robins, "AIDS Activism in South Africa"; Bertrand et al., "Voluntary Surgical Contraception"; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan, "Outsourcing Social Transformation."

everyone involved happier than did the encounters where Nicaraguans requested aid that would not be offered. Ironically, identifying Nicaraguans with *narrative* agency could be a more desirable outcome than meeting those who took initiative in humanitarian encounters in ways that violated organizational rules or a traveler's sense of what made for a proper aid encounter.

Aid as a Gift

I use the word *gift* to describe humanitarian encounters between volunteer tourists and Nicaraguan citizens because that is the word that they both used to describe such exchanges. Not all forms of social and material support in Nicaragua are considered gifts. The Nicaraguans I interviewed demonstrated a clear commitment to care for family, but the obligation to care for family was assumed and never referred to as a gift or a donation. Nor did they describe government programs as gifts even in the case of programs that closely resembled the work of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The respondents instead described government aid as either the fulfillment of the revolutionary goals of the Sandinistas or political manipulation that amounted to mostly broken campaign promises.

The twin forces of gratitude and reciprocity motivated the efforts of the Nicaraguans in this study to make sense of and respond to offers of aid from foreign volunteers. Marcel Mauss's classic work *The Gift* and other anthropological research on gift exchange illuminate the ways that these forces operate to sustain or unbalance social relationships, particularly relationships between parties with access to material wealth and social or political power. Gifts instill moral obligations by creating debts of

gratitude. Simmel argues that gratitude is both a feeling of positive regard toward the giver and a force that impels recipients to give in turn.[7]

The positive moral dimension of gratitude has not been closely examined in studies of reciprocity between unequal partners. Instead, research tends to focus on the ways chains of gift exchanges perpetuate social hierarchies or damage social bonds through the creation of debts that cannot be repaid.[8] Exploring encounters between travelers and locals in this study provides an opportunity to unlink these chains through an examination of gratitude at the level of face-to-face social interactions, where gift recipients feel a moral impulse to construct an appropriate response to a gift that they are unlikely to ever repay in kind.

Nicaraguan Models of Reciprocity

The Nicaraguans I spoke with drew on familiar cultural models to think about how to reciprocate the gifts they received from travelers. Patron-client ties are one familiar model in Nicaragua for thinking about a gift relationship between individuals. In a patron-client relationship, patrons offer resources, protection, and often employment to clients. Clients reciprocate as they can with support and services.[9] Historian Elizabeth Dore traces a particularly Nicaraguan embodiment of patronage ties to the practice of debt peonage around the turn of the 19th century. She argues that "patriarchy from above" – the imposition of planter-peon ties between landowners and laborers – operated in concert with "patriarchy from below" – the cultural and legal

[7] Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude."
[8] Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift*.
[9] Scott, "Patron-client Politics."

practice of male dominance at the household level.[10] The culturally and legally established role of male household leadership included both power over and responsibility to care for one's family. This intimate power dynamic was reproduced in the power and responsibilities taken up in the role of planter/landowner.

Journalists and politicians in the U.S. have characterized 21st century Nicaraguan politics as an extension of the *caudillo* politics established in 19th century Latin America.[11] The caudillo or leader is typically a charismatic military leader with a populist agenda who builds support and maintains power through networks of patronage. Current Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega and former president Arnoldo Alemán have been described as present-day caudillos, and they have brokered deals to consolidate power by limiting electoral access for less well-funded or popular political parties. In the remote villages I visited, residents were well aware of Ortega's strategic efforts to ensure popular support by providing household-level assistance in the form of livestock, machinery, or building materials. Among those who disclosed their political opinions, these strategies were characterized as either evidence of Ortega's commitment to the *pobresa* (the poor) or a blatant and insincere attempt to buy votes.

Economic and political patrons were a tangible presence in the daily lives of some of the Nicaraguans that I interviewed. José Luis was a foreman at the Aldeas Cafés coffee plantation until 2011. Before he was fired, he spoke eagerly to me about his relationship with his "friend," the Turkish-American plantation co-owner. He believed that this "friendship" gave him special political clout among fellow residents, which he used when networking with the local government and Partners in Solidarity. We also

[10] Dore, *Myths of Modernity*.
[11] Dye and Close, "Patrimonialism and Economic Policy."

spoke about corruption in local politics. I told him about growing up in Rhode Island, where Providence mayor Buddy Cianci was beloved for revitalizing the city but also imprisoned on corruption charges. The idea of a beloved but corrupt leader made perfect sense to this ardent Sandinista. He laughingly told me that for all he cared, the government could embezzle half of its treasury as long as some of the money went to helping the poor.

Many of the Nicaraguans I interviewed no longer had direct ties to a boss or local politician who might show a personal interest in their lives, but the language and rhythms of patronage remained familiar to many, especially the rural farmers I interviewed. They used these familiar patterns to envision a dyadic and personal relationship with wealthy foreign visitors. Studies from regions in Africa saturated with development NGOs indicate that this is precisely the kind of relationship many locals forge with international non-governmental organizations and Christian missionaries.[12]

Religion was another powerful force in Nicaraguan daily life that offered cognitive and cultural resources for thinking about reciprocity. In the U.S. context, research indicates aid recipients trust congregations more than other social service providers regardless of their own religious beliefs.[13] Religious aid recipients are also likely to express a desire to "give back" to individuals or community groups that provide them with support.[14] In Nicaragua, religious beliefs and traditions are a prominent feature of daily life and are likely to serve similarly central functions in people's interactions with religious travelers.

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[12] Englund, "Christian Independency"; Smith, "Practice of Family Planning Programs."
[13] Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu, "Effectiveness and Trustworthiness."
[14] Walling, "Power of Receiving."

There are three broad traditions in Nicaraguan religious life that may inform a gift exchange relationship: Evangelicalism, traditional Catholicism and liberation theology Catholicism. Among interview subjects, regular churchgoers were mainly Evangelicals, a group that is diverse and growing in Nicaragua, particularly among the urban poor.[15] Two aspects of Evangelical traditions inform a religious understanding of reciprocity between parties. First, these traditions emphasize individual salvation and personal responsibility to Jesus or God for one's behavior and faith.[16] The relationship between God and supplicant is understood to be dyadic and mutual in a manner similar to a patron-client tie. Second, the tradition of a "prosperity Gospel" theology claims that devotion to God and one's church will lead to material rewards, suggesting a possible role for foreign donors as the delivery system of such rewards. This theology is historically rooted in the Assemblies of God denomination, which is the largest non-Catholic church in Nicaragua and an active presence in at least two of the communities that I study.[17]

Traditional Catholic practices of strict hierarchies and intercessory prayer readily translate into a pyramid-like relationship among receptive Nicaraguans, generous foreign donors and an all-powerful God In contrast, liberation theology emphasizes social justice for the poor through the overthrow of oppressive social structures, by definition offering a religious model of resistance to hierarchy. This resistance appeals not only to some Nicaraguans but also to progressive foreign visitors such as Partners in Solidarity travelers who hoped transnational interactions could

[15] Lancaster, *God and the Revolution*.
[16] Stoll, *Politics of Evangelical Growth*.
[17] Center for the Study of Global Christianity (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), "World Christian Database."

embody a spirit of "accompaniment," as described in Chapter Two.[18] It is unclear just how extensively liberation theology principles penetrated the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguan *campesinos* (peasant farmers) that it championed.[19] In Comarco Este, however, this model of community organizing still informed civic life at the time of my visits.

Religion provides more than mental models for sorting out links among Nicaraguans, foreigners, and God. Religious traditions also involve familiar rituals that can be used to help make sense of unfamiliar encounters. In aid relationships, each time a ritual exchange takes place or fails to take place the social roles of participants are redefined. A gift relationship is built on a "chain" of interaction rituals through which a shared meaning of the aid relationship is affirmed or transformed.[20] For the Christian Nicaraguans and Christian donors in my study, the act of praying clearly marks a space or an encounter as sacred and imbued with special meaning. Prayers made in public help to define vertical and horizontal relationships among people and between people and the divine.[21] They also provide a shared framework for givers and receivers to make claims on each other in the name of God, and shared frameworks set expectations for future interactions. Finally, insofar as prayer is understood as a force that can bring tangible results to the lives of people, it can be a powerful instrument of reciprocity. Sociologist Peter Blau has argued that such "supernatural gifts" have the potential to cancel material debts even in a particularly entrenched "patron-client" relationship.[22]

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[18] Kreitzer and Wilson, "International Alliances in Social Work."
[19] Burdick, "Progressive Catholic Church in Latin America."
[20] Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.
[21] Massengill, "Prayers of the People."
[22] Blau, *Exchange and Power*.

Interpretations of Receiving

The data in this chapter come from interviews with 82 Nicaraguans living in communities that received foreign aid and from observation of ceremonial and informal gift exchanges in which U.S. travelers offered assistance to Nicaraguan recipients. Since I am interested in Nicaraguan *interpretations* of receiving aid, I focused on 10 ceremonial exchanges and close readings of about 25 narratives from the interviews. These events and stories provided the clearest examples of how Nicaraguans articulated the meaning of aid and their relationship to aid providers. Ceremonial exchanges tended to mark only large or valuable gifts such as a new home. While I witnessed informal and small-scale gift exchanges such as giving a family 100 Córdobas ($5 USD) or giving a child a bandana or a hat, the stories Nicaraguans related also focused on materially or symbolically significant gifts such as a house or a scholarship. My analysis therefore focused on the interpretation of gifts that were difficult to repay in kind and that filled needs Nicaraguans felt they were unable to meet on their own. In the following paragraphs, I offer limited commentary on the structural or demographic features that may determine which kinds of stories different Nicaraguans tell. I focus instead on comparing the ways that the presence and absence of references to God shaped interpretations of donor-recipient interactions.

God was a pervasive presence in Nicaraguan conversation. Stories were punctuated with exclamations of "*Gloria Dios!*" (Glory to God) to which the response "amen, amen" was common. I quickly learned to take leave of a visit with the phrase "*Dios le bendiga*" (God bless you). Travelers remarked on the vibrancy and presence of the divine in people's lives. They believed that Nicaraguans trusted and depended on

God in ways U.S. citizens could not even begin to imagine. In the minds of U.S. volunteers, people who live in that kind of poverty and isolation have "nowhere else to turn other than to rely on faith."

Even with the pervasiveness of faith in people's daily conversation, God was not omnipresent in narratives about receiving aid. The presence or absence of references to God in aid narratives was not a simple matter of speaking to religious or irreligious individuals. I did speak with a few atheist Nicaraguans, but most of the stories I heard were from self-identified Christians of various backgrounds.

In twenty-five stories that explained how someone received a gift, about half focused on the motives and actions of donors. Six suggested that God played an active role in inspiring a gift exchange. The remaining stories either described unsuccessful attempts to solicit aid or, in one case, a gift received from a non-related fellow Nicaraguan. God never made an appearance in stories of requests that were unsuccessful. Expressions of gratitude were also mixed. Ten stories described gratitude to donors only, while eight thanked God alone or God and U.S. donors both. Predictably, the formal rituals of gift exchange that I witnessed involved more allusions to the sacred than the stories did. Nine of ten ceremonies featured Nicaraguans offering prayers, reading scripture, praising God, and making promises in the name of God or Christ.

When faith was brought up in narratives or rituals, it was brought up in a big way. Religious explanations for aid transformed a hierarchical dyad between U.S. donors and Nicaraguan recipients into a trinity where an all-powerful God acted on donors and receivers. As I will elaborate below, this trinity could create space for empowerment of the recipients, but it sometimes worked against the interests of the

Nicaraguans and the aims of the sponsoring organizations by making hierarchical ties and emotional and economic dependency seem natural or divinely ordained.

Patron-centered Interpretations of Receiving Aid

I met Ana Ysidra in a village in northwestern Nicaragua that was constructed in 2006 by members of a U.S. chapter of the Rotary Club. Ana was a widowed mother of five children who claimed that the entire village ran on the power of her volunteer work. She used her training as a nurse to offer free medical care to women in the community. She taught adults to read in her home. She professed to be single-handedly leading a battle with the mayor's office to bring electricity to her community. Each of these stories blatantly exaggerated her importance in the community. "*Todo voluntario*" ("I do it all for free"), she emphasized to me repeatedly. She was also pleased to point out the perks she had "earned" from this work, including livestock from the government and a car battery that she used to light a single, bare bulb in her home.

Despite her pride in her own ability to make things happen for herself, Ana Ysidra shifted her tone when I asked about her home. She was no longer the star of her own story. "This is because of the Rotary Club," she explained. "The donors promoting this project knew about my life and what I had been through. So they asked me, 'Would you like a house?' And I said 'yes'."

When Nicaraguans told me stories about gifts of aid without using religious language, they almost always emphasized the initiative of foreign donors. Non-religious stories about gifts suggested that U.S. travelers "see a lot of poverty" and decide to give because "they want to help." Storytellers remarked on the care, love, and kindness that

North Americans demonstrated. None of the respondents suggested that travelers might have selfish motives for giving. They instead pointed to the genuine affection travelers showed to children and the long distances they journeyed as evidence of pure motives and generous hearts.

These stories rarely speculated about how characteristics of individual Nicaraguans might influence giving. When asked, respondents had difficulty explaining why some people got aid and others did not. One woman whose son did not get a high school scholarship said, "I think the people who get it, it's just because they're lucky." A few did hint that donors might be able to discern more worthy recipients. These individuals suggested a strong work ethic was necessary to truly appreciate and care for a gift such as a house. "To have something," an older woman explained, "You have to work hard." A Nicaraguan scientist and business owner cautioned me against giving away gifts with no strings attached because "Nicaraguans, when we have something, if we don't really work that hard for it then we don't really care about it." He suggested it would be better to make locals provide labor or pay back a small loan on a new house. Both organizations I studied engaged aid recipients in the provision of labor and required reimbursement of loans. Showing proper appreciation was a common theme in these stories, and proper appreciation required enthusiasm. Recipients enumerated the emotional dividends of material gifts, saying "to have a house is to live in dignity" or that it was "such a joy" to spend time with North Americans. "Without your help," one woman told me, "We probably wouldn't be as happy as we are now." Gratitude was often paired with an emphasis on how helpless Nicaraguans felt without foreign support. A community organizer repeatedly praised the efforts of foreign aid groups in Nicaragua, saying, "This is one of the poorest areas in our region, and so only through

non-government organizations is it possible for us to have this school." A mother named two people who made ongoing payments for her son's scholarship, saying, "I'm really thankful to Justin and Christy for the help, because I cannot afford it. It's really difficult for me."

Locals criticized fellow Nicaraguans that they believed were ungrateful. In scandalized tones they told me about the community leaders who sold shoes or clothes that they received or about the unappreciative neighbor who abandoned a donated house in search of employment in another region. In these non-religious stories, expressing gratitude was the main way the Nicaraguans I interviewed responded to large-scale gifts from foreigners. Stories implied that gratitude was owed to foreigners even when gifts created significant problems in people's lives, such as when a new home moved a family away from its sources of income or extended family support.

I interviewed one woman who was relocated by Manos por Dios but later returned to Verjel, the community near the town dump. She moved back so that her adult children who were still living there could care for her after renal failure dramatically limited her mobility. When I asked some of her former neighbors why someone might move back to the dump after leaving, the neighbors seemed indignant toward such behavior. One woman criticized such people as ungrateful opportunists looking for handouts. She knew that the dump attracted many foreign volunteers and aid organizations, whereas her own community only received support from Manos por Dios. Speaking to me as she might to any volunteer, she was apologetic. "This is a big effort you are doing for us. The people who go away from here, they don't care about your effort or anything like that. I feel really bad for those people. They don't think about the effort you are making for them."

The emphasis on active donors and powerless, passive Nicaraguans in these stories was remarkable because I routinely witnessed Nicaraguans taking active roles in their encounters with North Americans. U.S. travelers I interviewed frequently described Nicaraguan culture as friendly, hospitable, and generous. Children plucked flowers to place in women's hair or drew pictures for appreciative visitors. Adults welcomed volunteers into their homes and took time from their work to answer questions. In one case when one of the teams became lost, a man left his field of crops to walk the group to their worksite. Another team returning for a second year spent an afternoon with the family whose house they built the year before. Even after telling the visitors that their entire crop had failed this year due to draught, the family sent the group back to the dorms with five plastic bags filled with fruit.

These spontaneous overtures of friendship and responses to U.S. generosity were ever-present. Yet when asked, many Nicaraguans in the communities I studied had difficulty identifying gifts that they had given or lessons they had taught to North Americans. Ana Rosa was a woman in her twenties who served on the Community Power Committee, a kind of informal town council affiliated with the Sandinista Party. I interviewed Ana Rosa with her 63-year old mother, Dolores. Teams from Manos por Dios had been working on a school in their village for about five months when we talked. As local community leaders Ana Rosa and her brother had spent a significant amount of time working with the U.S. teams. After they spoke about their experiences meeting travelers, the following exchange took place among Ana Rosa, Dolores, and me:

> LiErin: So do you think you've taught the Americans anything when they come here?
> Dolores: Yes, of course. And we also learn from them.
> LiErin: Like what?

Ana Rosa: Well, the big love that you have. Because with your work, with your love, you show us the way you love the people.
LiErin: And what do you think we learn from you?
Ana Rosa: *(laughing)* Well, I don't know. I'd like to learn that. What do you learn from us?
LiErin: Well, we learn to make concrete volcanoes (*A technique for mixing cement by hand*). And to work very hard. (*The women laughed*.) But I also think that we learn about love from you too.
Dolores: I think what you take from us is just disappointing things.
LiErin: Oh, no. I have spoken to many Americans who come here and almost all of them say, "I go there to give, and when I come home, I have received so much more from them than I gave."
Dolores: Thank God.
Ana Rosa: Thank God that you can have a blessing from God, so that you can continue to work with us. Because for us, this is such a blessing. We feel happy with this…. We're overjoyed.

Our teasing banter turned serious when Dolores admitted that she thought that foreigners could only get a sense of disappointment from observing the insufficiency of her life. The idea that travelers receive more than they give was not a cliché to the women but a surprise and a pleasure. Ana Rosa's last statement offered her own vision for ongoing reciprocal ties, a vision grounded in faith. Later in this chapter I describe the ways that Ana Rosa and fellow Nicaraguans used their spirituality as a basis of their understandings of reciprocity.

Not only did Nicaraguan respondents reciprocate gifts, they routinely tried to initiate gift exchanges by asking for help. They wrote letters and pulled individuals aside to ask for help. They stood up in town meetings to name their needs. Children begged for candy, soda, cash, work gloves, hats, or bandanas. In 82 interviews, I received 30 requests for help for the speaker or for her friends or community. Many of these solicitations were carefully indirect and exceedingly polite, distancing the request as much as possible from outright begging. When asked what message I should take

back to the U.S. about Nicaragua, a typical response was "tell them we are poor and we need their help."

In my observation, most requests for aid initiated by Nicaraguans did not come to fruition. Still, on many trips at least a few small requests were met – more on Manos por Dios trips than on Partners in Solidarity trips. In a community such as Villa Santa Inés where over thirty Manos por Dios teams work each year, a few successes per trip added up to an impressive rate. Yet when Nicaraguans talked to me in non-religious language about receiving aid, they downplayed or ignored these active roles. Their stories instead seemed to confirm the fears of organizations and travelers that charitable aid encourages dependence and powerlessness. Whether or not Nicaraguans emphasized powerlessness when they spoke to each other about receiving aid, the effusive gratitude they expressed and the stories they told foreigners played out a familiar, hierarchical relationship of foreign patrons and Nicaraguan client-farmers.

Receiving Gifts as a Spiritual Experience

Religious stories and responses to gifts placed a Christian God at the center of giving. One Nicaraguan community organizer who administered foreign development programs reminded a gathering of Nicaraguans and U.S. donors, "We have to be thankful to God. God is the only one who can provide these blessings." These stories gave the ultimate power and credit to God. They also brought Nicaraguan voices into the narrative in ways non-religious stories did not. Certain themes resonated across Nicaraguan interpretations of receiving. In the accounts I heard or rituals I witnessed, Nicaraguans using both secular and religious language said they felt powerless to

change their lives without intervention. The motives of givers were assumed to be pure. Finally, expressing heartfelt gratitude was considered a necessary response to receiving aid. Beyond these themes, bringing God into the equation highlighted active participation of Nicaraguans in ways largely absent from non-religious interpretations of receiving. Some people saw the care they received as God's response to their own prayers or devotion. Religious interpretations also expressed the desire to "give back" spiritual care to the U.S. donors through prayer.

God Sends Angels and Rewards the Faithful

For some of the Nicaraguan respondents, foreign volunteers were God's messengers or even angels sent to do God's will. A man helping build a school for his community told me that "with the brigades coming from the U.S., we are being blessed by God." Talk of angels or intermediaries usually described volunteers as responding to specific prayers. A woman in her mid-fifties named Claudia joined our team one day as we played marbles with some boys in the dusty street. She held out her tattered Bible and shared her hope to one day have a fresh, clean book. Quoting scripture and flipping through torn pages, she testified about maintaining her faith through many trials, including dreams of demonic possession, a near-paralyzing back injury, and her son's imprisonment in a Guatemalan jail. "When we pray," Claudia said, "we ask for strength, and God strengthens us." A team member who was moved by her story promised in precise, accented Spanish to find her a new Bible. She beamed and said, "He says ask for things, and we'll give them to you. So thank God for sending this angel who is going to

give me a Bible." Asking God for aid was seen as one proactive way Nicaraguans could bring about gifts. Also, telling foreign visitors about those prayers did not hurt.

Religious narratives about receiving gifts sometimes included explanations for why some people received help and others did not. The narratives suggested that piety or commitment was being rewarded. Local leaders at Aldeas Cafés held a lottery among six families that owned land but had decrepit homes; the winning family would receive a house paid for by a congregation from Kansas. The Kansas church sent a team (described in Chapter Six) to help begin construction. When the wife explained to me how she felt when her husband pulled the winning lottery ticket, she focused on faith, not chance, as the driving force of their fortune. She said, "Sometimes when you serve God, God gives you so many things that you cannot even imagine." In a religiously active community, her family was remarkably devout. Her husband regularly joined the family for worship and spoke eloquently about his faith. Both practices were unusual for men in this community. The new homeowners spoke with excitement about holding a devotional service at the worksite before the mission team left and about having a house blessing with their own pastor when the house was complete. While the husband described their new home as an unimagined, unearned blessing, the wife and members of the Kansas-based volunteer team seemed to agree that God played a hand in selecting this family.

Giving glory to God first could also have future rewards, according to some narratives. In the tiny village of Sacuanjoche in the mountains of central Nicaragua, residents asked U.S. visitors to build a church for their Assemblies of God congregation. The liberal Protestant congregation assisting them was skeptical. In a community with toxic water, no electricity, no roads, no medical services, and 55 dilapidated homes, was

a church really the first priority? In three separate preliminary visits, a representative asked community members, "Are you sure you want a church? For the same cost, we could build two houses." At the community's insistence, the team agreed to build a church.[23] I asked one of the community leaders why it was so important to have a church first. He replied, "As the Lord says, 'First God and then everything else will follow naturally.'" This man and his fellow church members hoped that by giving praise and glory to God they would be blessed by God in return.

Notably, this sense of rewarded devotion was the one distinction I observed between the gift giving narratives of Catholic and Evangelical respondents. Among the dozen or so narratives from active church participants, only stories told by Evangelicals implied that they were being rewarded for devotion. The distinction makes intuitive sense given the popularity of "prosperity gospel" messages in Assemblies of God congregations, which was the denomination to which most of the Evangelical respondents belonged. Since my data on the question of rewards is limited, I hesitate to stress this difference between Catholics and Evangelicals.

Religious Reciprocity: Sharing Blessings

In many of the religious stories about gift giving, Nicaraguans described generosity as a way of giving back to God for the blessings in people's lives. In interviews and observed encounters, Nicaraguans told me that travelers wanted to give because they had been blessed by God with both material resources and a spiritual impulse of generosity. Their willingness to help came from God, who "put his hands on

[23] I tell this story in greater detail in Chapter Eight.

their hearts" and made them kind and loving people who wanted to reach out to their "brothers and sisters" in Nicaragua. Two people described the wealth and development of the U.S. as ordained by God. The wife of a security guard at the coffee plantation told me, "Everything comes because it's God's will. So probably God provides a lot of development to the Americans. The U.S. is one of the countries that has the greatest development in the world."

Some Nicaraguans argued that if volunteer tourists gave because they had been blessed with caring hearts as well as prosperity, then those who received gifts should also want to care for others. Locals demonstrated care in two main ways. First they offered care back to travelers by praying for them. Second, they demonstrated care by working to help fellow Nicaraguans.

Many of the respondents spoke convincingly of the efficacy of prayer and could point to the tangible results of prayer in their own lives. When they promised to pray for U.S. travelers, they did so with the conviction that God answered prayers and with the explicit understanding that prayer was their way of giving back for the support they had been given. Above I described how a devout husband and wife built their house with help from a Kansas volunteer team. When the family and team gathered to bless the house in a ceremony near the end of the week, the husband expressed his love and indebtedness to the team by saying,

> I feel really thankful to all of you, and you will be always in my prayers. I don't have money to pay you back what you have done for us. I never thought about having my own home…. This is possible now with God's help and with the effort you have made for us. I know my heart is very small to pay you back, my brothers and sisters…. God bless you in a very special way, and I love all of you in the name of our Lord.

In another village, I met a sixty-five year old woman whose livelihood was particularly tenuous. Her age and health made it difficult to find work, so she relied on the generosity of her adult children, who also frequently struggled with unemployment. She was the head of a household of eight, including two children. Without a strong, young adult presence in her plastic-walled *champa* (hut), she was repeatedly a target for theft. I asked her if she had a message for my friends in the U.S. who knew very little about her country. She did not ask for aid directly. Instead, she told me, "I will pray for you all, even if I don't know you or your friends. I will pray to God for you all to get more money, more luck, and to help us as much as you can." Like others I interviewed, this woman spoke of the vast inequalities in wealth between travelers and local residents as natural or God-ordained. Her way of being generous to me was to offer prayers. She also sent me on my way clutching a handful of sticky tamarind pods as a snack. Her hope – or the only hope she dared to name aloud to me – was that God would bless travelers like me to come help her build a church and maybe a better home for her family.

I heard many prayers while interviewing local community members. The volunteers I traveled with had fewer such opportunities. Manos por Dios travelers heard some prayers in response to their direct gifts. Partners in Solidarity travelers heard them during ceremonial moments celebrating progress on a large project such as a house or a well. Ceremonial moments to acknowledge aid were particularly important opportunities for givers and receivers to clarify their relationship and their responsibilities to one another. Most of the ceremonies I witnessed took place on Partners in Solidarity trips where travelers and Nicaraguans both expected to see one another again. Travelers usually led these rituals, set the tone, and did most of the speaking. But several of the Nicaraguans present also took moments to express

gratitude, to identify their hopes for future support, and to make commitments of reciprocity for the gifts they had received. These claims were almost always made in God's name.

A single mother in Comarco Este wept to see her half-finished house festooned with balloons and her yard teeming with neighbors joining in celebration. She choked out this prayer of gratitude: "From the bottom of my heart, I ask my Lord to provide for every one of you to continue to move forward so that you can support other people as you have done for me. God bless you and thanks a lot."

Comarco Este was the one community I visited that had been actively courting foreign development investments for over twenty years. Those efforts were spearheaded by a pastoral committee, which was founded in the 1970s in the liberations theology tradition and was supported during the 1980s and 1990s by Catholic Maryknoll nuns. In the interviews and formal gift exchange ceremonies I witnessed in Comarco Este, religious narratives of reciprocity often included prayers as an expression of the care that recipients hoped to offer volunteer tourists. They also sometimes included a commitment to help support others in their community who were in need.

The veteran foreman of housing projects gave a polished, humble speech to the U.S. travelers gathered to celebrate the new home in Comarco Este that belonged to the single mom mentioned above. This man offered his services at a significantly reduced rate as a gesture of support for the work of international groups. In his speech, he suggested God should be credited for the impulse volunteers felt to give and for his own commitment to complete the labor left undone at the end of the week. He reminded travelers that their ongoing efforts enabled his community to support its more

vulnerable members. After affirming this commitment to indirect reciprocity or to "paying forward" the blessings he had received, he offered travelers a prayer and a promise.

> Thanks to the Lord for all your hard work and for the strength that He has given me to do what has been done and to complete whatever is missing. Also, I would like to thank you because we're supporting so many families in Nicaragua thanks to your resources. And for me as a foreman, I would like to ask you to continue supporting your brothers and sisters in Nicaragua. God bless you, and God take care of you, and you have a nice trip back home. And just to let you know, I'm going to finish everything.

In the speeches aid recipients made during formal ceremonies, "God bless you" was more than a greeting or a ritualized response. The phrase was a gift and a promise. It was a way of giving back. The promise to work hard and complete the house were important contributions as well, but these offers simply completed or extended the blessings that U.S. resources brought to the Nicaraguan community. Prayer seemed to be the best way Nicaraguans respondents could return something extra to the givers themselves.

Prayer may seem an anemic basis for bonding two groups as materially dissimilar as U.S. and Nicaraguan citizens. However, narratives of receiving that did not include God language offered even less to tie foreigners to a particular community or individual. For Christian travelers, prayer was a familiar ritual that they practiced frequently during travel. One business owner told me that his schedule at home made it difficult to find time for church. He named daily prayers on the trip as a motivation to renew his faith. "It kinda brought that communal, religious part back to me," he said, and he added that the daily prayers made him want to attend church more regularly when he returned home. While some travelers spoke of prayer as a force that could result in material dividends such as a safe and uneventful flight or good health, most

focused on the power prayer had to inspire feelings of community. They described feeling comforted knowing that someone prayed for them in times of difficulty. They felt especially honored that people living in poverty who had "real problems" would take the time to think about and pray for comparatively privileged foreigners.

In Chapter Four, I described how Manos por Dios staff gave its travelers the homework assignment of finding a Nicaraguan to pray for. I stood that day in a circle with three travelers and two Nicaraguans, a mother and adult son who let us tour their one-room home. In each person's face, I saw the concentration and emotional resonance of a powerful moment of shared attention. A woman from Ohio was in that group and had been scared and nervous about the idea of trying to pray with someone who did not speak the same language. How could she communicate her intentions? Prayer turned out to be a universal language. Of course, it helped that a fellow traveler spoke enough Spanish to invite the Nicaraguans to pray with us. The woman from Ohio later told the group that language and previously unimaginable differences in wealth were transcended in a moment of shared devotion to God. For people of a shared faith, the value of prayer was beyond material measure in terms of its effectiveness in bringing people closer to one another and to God. Volunteer tourists viewed prayer as a gift in and of itself. Prayer also reminded them of their responsibility to view themselves as equal to fellow Christians under God.

Patronage, Prayer, and Narrative Agency

Analysts and practitioners concur that in poverty alleviation and economic development, more participation by aid recipients is better than less. I witnessed

widespread efforts by Nicaraguans to name their needs and ask for assistance. However, I did not often see among Nicaraguans an awareness of these efforts as empowered action. Narratives that focused solely on volunteer tourists and receivers combined effusive gratitude and the image of a passive, helpless aid recipient. These stories lacked a means to link the act of receiving to the proactive social roles that volunteers and humanitarian agencies hoped to instill or unearth. In contrast, respondents who told stories about an aid relationship between volunteers, receivers, and God drew on the familiar ritual of prayer as an act of personal agency. Prayer could be a supplication. It could also be an active way to engage a force much more powerful than oneself, i.e., God, and to influence change in the world. Within this framework, the Nicaraguans with whom I spoke were conscious of themselves as change agents and were better equipped to participate in an empowerment-centered approach to economic development.

Religious language and prayer also helped contextualize aid as part of an ongoing relationship of mutual care between Nicaraguans and U.S. citizens. For Nicaraguans working with religious donors, having a shared religious identity generated feelings of solidarity and generalized trust. More concretely, gift-exchange relationships were strengthened through reciprocity. According to social theorist Komter, when giving is unidirectional or gifts of equivalent value cannot be returned, relationships may end or be marked by resentment and dependency.[24] The Nicaraguan respondents had difficulty identifying resources that they could offer to the U.S. travelers. They were largely unaware that travelers regularly attributed insights about

[24] Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift*.

faith and materialism to their experiences of meeting Nicaraguans. Tangible efforts to repay U.S. generosity were often rejected by travelers. For example, travelers usually refused food or drink not only because of contamination but also because they believed it could not be spared.

In religious narratives and encounters, prayer could be a source of connection. Prayer was a deliberate way to demonstrate care. No matter what travelers thought about the efficacy of prayer, they were highly unlikely to reject a Nicaraguan's offer to pray for them in the same way that they consistently rejected food or drink. Prayer was not the same as a tangible gift, and Nicaraguans sometimes acknowledged that it seemed an inadequate offering. Still, religious narratives underscored a desire for mutual care and suggested the form that a long-term relationship might take. I do not intend to argue that religion is the only model that Nicaraguans have for a long-term relationship with travelers. Other evidence indicates Nicaraguans in my study used models of family life or of civic engagement to describe their interactions with travelers. But in the context of making sense out of the large-scale gifts that U.S. travelers provided, accounts that did not include talk about God also did not include descriptions of efforts to establish or deepen a relationship between foreign donors and receivers.

Religion provided the means for the Nicaraguan respondents to see themselves as active participants in the process of receiving aid. Religion also confirmed their belief that they were powerless to act without external support. When asked to tell me their hopes and dreams, nearly a third of Nicaraguan respondents indicated that the only way they could imagine themselves "*que salgan adelante*" (moving forward) or "*mejorar*" (improving) was through external help. They said that they needed to "look for somebody to help us," such as a non-governmental organization or individual foreign

donors. They also mentioned God often, hoping in the future God would "help us have a better life."

When non-religious narratives of the Nicaraguans emphasized powerless and passivity, they did not include ontological assumptions that such powerlessness was natural or permanent. But many of their religious narratives sacralized the status quo. The narratives included descriptions of the material and developmental gaps between the U.S. and Nicaragua as God-ordained and natural. Supplications asked for protection or for an angel to come to help people. They asked God to heap blessings upon the already-powerful U.S. travelers in order to increase the desire and ability of North Americans to provide for Nicaraguans. Rarely did the respondents ask for an increase in their own strength or capacity. In a development milieu centered on empowerment, this naturalization of power differentials and helplessness is the very definition of dependency. That Nicaraguan accounts about a relationship among God, donors, and receivers tended to reinforce dependency is especially striking given the country's rich spiritual history of liberation theology.

In my time in Nicaragua, I saw little evidence of the potential for religion to operate as a force for social change at the community level, at least not in terms of changing the dynamics of power and supplication in transnational aid relationships. The ways that religious language was deployed in most of the communities that I studied stressed individual agency while suppressing aspirations toward self-empowerment at the community level. Despite evidence of locally initiated community development projects, the religious language that I heard locals use with foreign donors left little space for a collective Nicaraguan moral agency apart from an all-powerful God, God-appointed foreign emissaries, and devout Nicaraguan recipients.

For the Nicaraguan respondents, religious rituals and beliefs were powerful, pervasive cultural tools that both empowered and constrained approaches to aid relationships. Scholars and practitioners of international development would be well served by a dedicated engagement with questions about the roles of religion and patronage in transnational relief and development efforts.

Part 3: Return

On Partners in Solidarity trips, the last night in Nicaragua was pizza night. The Best Western near the Managua airport had hot showers and poolside bartenders. Pizza Hut delivered. These luxuries marked the transition from religious volunteer to homeward-bound tourist. On one trip, someone joked about Homeland Security investigating the awful smells emanating from the dirty work clothes in our suitcases. Perhaps travelers felt as I did, as if the dust of Nicaragua continued to seep out from pores and to accumulate under fingernails for weeks after travel. At home, travelers did laundry and indulged in warm showers. They sorted pictures, gave away souvenirs, and settled back into the routines of daily life. For some, pictures on cell phones or computer desktops became frequent reminders of Nicaragua. Others had difficulty recalling specific faces or experiences.

When the bags are unpacked, the souvenirs given away, and the weeks turn to months, what meaning does religious volunteer tourism continue to have for the lives of travelers? The next two chapters offer new perspectives on this question, which has been a central focus of research on volunteer tourism, religious or otherwise. Existing analyses of such travel tend to examine the relationship between travel and prosocial attitudes and behaviors after the travel experience. They take into account factors such as volunteer hours, money donated to charity, and attitudes toward people from other cultures and countries. Researchers ask about how travel changes people's lives, focusing on whether or not travel makes prosocial people into *more* prosocial people. For example, do travelers donate more money to their churches after travel?

Some of this research also investigates the transitivity of the positive effects of travel: do volunteer hours spent in Nicaragua lead to greater volunteering in one's local community? Explanations that compare pre- and post-travel conditions draw conclusions about measurable change or its lack. However, the mechanisms of such change remain murky. The mere fact of travel is insufficient explanation, but empirical evidence pinpointing change mechanisms is scarce.[1] Moreover, many travelers I interviewed described experiences and outcomes that a study measuring increased generosity cannot account for.

In the next two chapters, I address questions about the significance of travel after volunteers return home. First, in Chapter Eight I identify the practice of daily reflection as the central meaning making mechanism of travel. I illustrate the ways organizations taught travelers particular styles of reflection and how reflective talk limited or directed the kinds of claims people made after they returned home. This chapter also addresses speculation about the transitivity of prosocial actions. I argue that daily reflection did *not* help travelers imagine continuities between their cross-cultural outreach and activities at home. If travelers made such connections, they did so in spite, not because, of the practices learned during travel. In Chapter Nine, I turn to the trope of change. I examine how travelers' social contexts and cultural mores, in conjunction with their trip experiences, positioned them to be open or resistant to narratives of change. Ultimately, I argue that a focus on *change* masks an alternative goal travelers had to bring their *values* and their *actions* into greater harmony.

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[1] As I described in Chapter Two, Brian Howell's book makes a compelling argument for the role of narrative as a mechanism of transformation. Here, I expand this approach to account for both narrative and other forms of meaning making and to contribute to knowledge of the diversity of expressions of religious volunteer tourism.

Chapter Eight: Reflecting

In this chapter, I consider how two kinds of reflective talk during travel shaped travelers' actions and their interpretations of experiences both during and after travel. By reflective talk, I refer to a common trip practice of volunteers gathering to talk about and make sense of the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the day. While daily reflection is a common practice across volunteer tourism experiences, the style and content of reflective talk vary across organizations. These variations lead to divergent ways of making meaning from one's travel encounters. As I will describe below, Manos por Dios encouraged personal, internally focused reflection ("What does this experience mean *for me*?"), while Partners in Solidarity practiced a *social reflexivity* that encouraged travelers to imagine the ramifications of an experience on the future relationship between travelers and local hosts.

These different forms of reflexivity encouraged travelers to imagine very different "lessons" from their time-out-of-time experiences. Personal reflexivity contributed to an episodic orientation toward travel. It taught travelers to associate travel with changes in their personal behavior or in the spiritual or material wellbeing of Nicaraguan beneficiaries. Social reflexivity *embedded* travelers in an orientation toward transformation of social conditions. Groups practicing social reflexivity discussed not only personal changes but also corporate ones at the level of congregations or communities.

In this chapter, I explain how Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity habituated travelers to personal and social styles of reflexivity. Then, I illustrate the link

between reflexive styles and post-travel narratives by describing two teams as they experienced in-field reflective talk and reported to me their post-travel memories and activities. I found evidence that contradicted a central assertion of advocates for religious humanitarian travel. Many argue that interactions abroad will inspire changes in travelers' behavior at home. This hypothesis aligns with claims by 19th century historian Alexis de Tocqueville and more recent research on social capital that some forms of civic engagement help people "spiral outward" into ever-wider circles of outreach and social connections. That is, engagement in one social context may equip and inspire people to engage in other social contexts. To the contrary, I found that neither the personal nor the social forms of reflexivity provided travelers with language or concepts to connect their international outreach to poverty alleviation or volunteer work at home.

Cultivating Reflexivity

The orienting stories I discussed in Chapter Four helped shape travelers' expectations about their trip by anchoring them in time and space. The "episodic" stories told during Manos por Dios trips marked travel as significant because it was set apart from ordinary life. Stories emphasized the recent past and immediate future consequences of actions. These stories influenced cross-national interactions by teaching travelers to pay attention to minimal, localized context cues. At the same time, traveler efforts to make sense of their interactions often engaged universalized rather than context-specific mental schema, as when travelers' gendered expectations around reproduction and education shaped their interactions with children. Partners in

Solidarity's "embedded" stories marked travel as significant by reminding travelers of a long, shared history of global political and economic ties. They directed attention to the potential long-term consequences of even casual interactions. This attention informed the actions travelers took in cross-national interactions. The success of positive interactions was attributed to the attentiveness of travelers to a wide array of relevant contextual cues for behavior. When organizational staff used episodic or embedded orientations, they communicated expectations about what a "good" traveler would do, say, or think. When staff led nightly reflective conversations, travelers learned to craft their own episodic or embedded claims and stories and to turn their experiences into explanations about how best to do good in the world.

Theorists Durkheim, Goffman, Collins, and others have argued that meaning making happens in interaction. During group reflection, the truth of that claim was evident to many team members. One Partners in Solidarity traveler acknowledged this insight by thanking his fellow travelers in one of the nightly gatherings. He said to them, "It would have been overwhelming to process what's going on this week without pulling it together, making meaning, discussing.... I needed to hear your processing."

Dedicated space to talk about and collectively process emotionally overwhelming experiences is a common practice and distinguishing feature of religious volunteer travel. Participants not only have an experience; they re-live that experience by talking about it with one another. In conversation, they try out, adapt, and decide on a particular meaning for the encounter. Meaning making through interaction is a familiar process. Before traveling, participants have many informal opportunities to practice this kind of work in their daily lives. For example, many have participated in a family ritual of reviewing the events of the day over an evening meal. Over repeated

encounters, a family comes to develop ritual language such as key words or scripts, communication shortcuts, styles of interpretation, and other habitual interpretive tools. These shared styles of interaction contribute to both a sense of group identity and a shared understanding of their common purpose and goals as a family.

However, reflection time during religious volunteer travel is distinct from this kind of daily routine for a few reasons. First, groups reflect on a shared experience rather than reporting on separate lives. Second, the encounters of the day are likely to be new or at least unusual, necessitating more overt work at meaning making. Finally, even though travelers may informally discuss or unpack a puzzling encounter over a meal or while working, during devotionals (as Manos por Dios calls this time) or reflections (the term Partners in Solidarity prefers), the group's entire focus is directed at consciously forming insights about the day's events.

During daily reflection time at Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity, organizational staff set the conversational tone and modeled specific kinds of interpretations. Travelers could adopt or circumvent these interpretive tools. In many cases, adoption was easy because the tools were congruent with their pre-existing attitudes or habits of meaning making. When travelers did stray from the organization's dominant mode of reflecting, comments were sometimes ignored or redirected to conform to the models set forth by leaders. Travelers' own talk during reflective discussions tended to adhere closely to these models, and these modes of meaning making followed travelers into their post-trip conversations with friends and family and into their post-travel interviews with me. When travelers spoke about how their trips influenced their values and actions in daily life, they continued to use the narrative frames they adopted during these daily reflection times.

Manos por Dios devotionals favored stories and interpretations that focused inward on personal revelations, spiritual growth, or self-improvement. Partners in Solidarity reflection included these kinds of personal insights but also cultivated a practice of social reflexivity. As I described in Chapter Two, groups practice social reflexivity when they talk together about their relationships to other people or groups with which they interact. This talk helps groups to maintain and strengthen social ties with interaction partners and to adapt to changing environments or relationships. Social reflexivity involves both reflection on past encounters and speculation about the trajectory of future interactions. For Partners in Solidarity teams, that past encompassed a vast history and discussions of the future involved hope for changing social conditions over a matter of both years *and* generations.

How Manos por Dios Created Devotional Space

Devotion time with Manos por Dios was remarkably consistent across time and groups, whether staff or volunteer tourists led the reflection. Most weeks, groups conducted two daily devotional times: a short one immediately following breakfast and a longer follow-up in the evening some time after dinner. To create space for "Devos," teams cleared the morning or evening meal and reset the dining space, stacking tables in the corner and arranging plastic chairs in a circle in the cleared space, comfortably seating up to forty. Devotional time and space were set apart more by auditory cues (a call to attention, prayer, music) than by visual cues (the appearance of crosses, candles, or religious images).

The format of Devos was familiar for team members who had previously participated in small groups such as Bible Study gatherings. Typically, the leader selected a passage from the Bible or an excerpt from a non-fiction book with a spiritual theme. After summarizing or reading the passage, the leader interpreted the story. She or he explained the significance of the story with respect to the experiences that team members might be having during the trip. These explanations often included a personal anecdote about something that had happened during the day or week. Sometimes, devotions end there, with an invitation to silently reflect on a theme throughout the remainder of the day. In other cases, the leader invited the team to share thoughts, either by asking each person to speak in turn, by opening the floor to anyone who chose to speak, or by breaking the group into pairs for more intimate talk. Some teams left devotional leadership to the missionary staff of Manos por Dios, while others assigned a team member or rotated among themselves the responsibility of facilitating devotionals. The staff often included music and played songs with lyrics that encouraged further contemplation of the day's theme. When teams led their own devotions, Manos por Dios staff still modeled a personal style of reflexivity. They did so by speaking up and sharing their own stories in response to a Devo leader's requests for comments or by interjecting their own reflective questions for the whole group. Finally, devotions usually closed with prayer.

Staff and travelers often offered forthright claims about how God works or how the world works. Travelers rarely discussed or contradicted these claims together. In general, stories and claims made during Devos were offered as the externalization of an internal thought process: here's what this experience means to me. Responses affirmed that reaction ("I feel that way too.") or moved on to share a related but separate insight

("Here's what Susan's experience meant to her"). Communal talk during devotional time reiterated an episodic view of travel by soliciting spiritual insights rather than social ones and by privileging serial storytelling over the collective unpacking of multiple meanings of a single shared encounter.

The structure of reflection was communal, and the process of reflecting was collective. Often team members came to similar conclusions about the meaning of the day's events for their lives. Participants agreed that they wanted to work on their prayer life or that Nicaraguans had a lot to teach "Americans" about happiness and priorities. None of these elements is sufficient to describe Manos por Dios teams as practicing social reflexivity as Lichterman defines it. Social reflexivity is directed at figuring out the meaning of a group's ties to other groups or institutions in its wider context: of defining who the group is in terms of how it should relate to some other group or groups. While Manos por Dios-style reflection did encourage talk about relationships, that talk was directed to personal rather than collective connections. Specifically, devotional talk revolved around the ways growth in one's personal relationship with God could have a positive impact in all other social relationships.

How Partners in Solidarity Cultivated Social Reflexivity

Since they were usually smaller than Manos por Dios teams, Partners in Solidarity teams gathered as a complete group and communicated informally more often: at each meal or at the cantina over Pepsi or beer at the end of a long day. Travelers checked in with each other spontaneously throughout the day in pairs and small groups. One team member might ask another for advice about how to refuse

requests for individual aid in a compassionate way. Another might relate an unsettling encounter with a Nicaraguan: Did I say the right thing to Rosita? How do you think she interpreted my words? Many consulted executive director Sarah with their concerns, asking her to help puzzle out what to do when trying to embody a particularly abstract value such as "solidarity" or "mutuality."

Nightly reflection was deliberately marked off for a certain kind of talk. Teams circled around a candle, usually on a front porch. The lighting or extinguishing of the candle was the only consistent formality indicating that reflection time had begun or ended. Prayer and deep breathing were also sometimes used to mark the opening or closing of this special time. Reflection here did not include the types of exegetical statements frequently made by devotion leaders at Manos por Dios. Instead, Sarah would frame a series of thought-provoking questions. She often began by asking about the sights, sounds, smells, or tastes that people remembered from the day. Then, Sarah's questions directed participants away from talking about personal experiences toward thinking about the meaning of shared experience.

Sometimes that transition happened organically during the conversation. Often brief quotations from poets or Latin American activists sparked that turn. Each team received customized journals that included daily quotes and reflection questions that touched on themes in that day's quotation. These quotes and questions drew attention to interactions and relationships. For instance, a personal favorite of mine was this quote from Rumi: "You think because you understand 'one' you must also understand 'two,' because one and one make two. But you must also understand 'and'." Quotes like this one emphasized that taken-for-granted definitions must be re-examined. Sarah followed this quote with a question, "Where have you seen 'and' today?" The quote and

question turned the focus of reflection to a meditation on the relationships that travel made possible: ties between team members, between the team and Nicaraguans, and between a particular congregation in the U.S. and a particular community in Nicaragua.

Comparing Reflexive Styles

Serendipitously for me as a researcher, in the winter of 2010 a Manos por Dios staff person and a Partners in Solidarity traveler each chose the same story to guide group reflection: an excerpt from a non-fiction book called *Same Kind of Different as Me.* The book describes the beginning of a friendship between a black homeless man named Denver and a wealthy white man named Ron. Ron tries to reach out to the skeptical Denver, saying, "I want to be your friend. What do you think about that?" Denver considers the request using a fishing metaphor. In his experience, black people fish for the purpose of catching food. White people fish for fun, practicing the strange habit of "catch and release." He does not want a "catch and release" kind of relationship. He would only make the effort to develop a relationship across the divides of race, wealth, and life experience if Ron was in it for the long haul.[1]

The contrasting ways the story was presented and received illustrate differences in organizational approaches to meaning making. In a Manos por Dios devotion with a team from North Carolina, this story was used to make a point about relationships people have with the divine rather than with one another. Hanna, Director of Missions, opened the morning Devo by sharing the day's theme of "God catching our attention."

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[1] Hall, Moore, and Vincent, Same Kind of Different as Me: A Modern-Day Slave, an International Art Dealer, and the Unlikely Woman Who Bound Them Together.

When Hanna told the team that she wanted everyone to have "not a catch and release kind of week," she was talking about the ways people walk away from God, not from each other. God doesn't let go of people, she explained, but people often let go of God.

She contended that God grabbed people's attention in dramatic ways during travel and that talking with Nicaraguans was one way to feel God's dramatic presence. She continued by saying, "God doesn't touch your heart by shoveling cement. He does it with people." Here, interactions were framed as important because they could teach travelers something about God's purpose in their own lives.

In Chapter Four I described how Manos por Dios encouraged people to avoid contacting friends and family at home during their week in Nicaragua in order to keep the week special and separate from routine life. Echoing this sentiment, Hanna suggested that "just jumping back into your old life, jumping back into the craziness that life can be in the States" would be the wrong response to this week of retreat. A better response would be to actively look for God's presence and to hold onto those experiences upon return. Hanna did not specify how to hold onto God. This lack of specificity was consistent with another important theme in the personalized concept of devotions employed by Manos por Dios. If each person was called to learn a specific lesson from God or to fill a certain role in "God's global tapestry" (a metaphor sometimes used by Manos por Dios staff), then each person's task or response was likely to be just as individual. There was no discussion during this Devo. Hanna closed the session by playing some recorded music and inviting travelers to quietly contemplate the story.

Partners in Solidarity congregation Fellowship United Church of Christ (UCC) was in its third year of travel to their partner village Sacuanjoche in Nicaragua when

one of its members brought up Ron and Denver's story during reflection. After her first trip to Sacuanjoche in 2009, reporter Carrie read *Same Kind of Different as Me.* During her second trip to Nicaragua in Spring 2010, she led a reflection where she told the story of Denver and Ron. As she reached the point in the story when Denver declares that he does not want a catch and release friendship, Sarah hummed loudly in surprise and affirmation. The story was new to her, but she immediately connected Ron and Denver's friendship to the work she had been doing in Nicaragua for over twenty years.

The story resonated with other team members as well. They spent much of that evening's forty-minute reflection "talking about the ways we don't have to catch and release" the people of Sacuanjoche. "Catch and release" friendships became a powerful metaphor for what the congregation did not want its relationship to Sacuanjoche to become. For Carrie, the "catch and release" metaphor became an important symbol of the kind of person she wanted to be. She told me in an interview, "That kind of connection feeds me. It makes me a better person… so that I can be a better person for my own community [in Arizona] as well as giving to the community over there [in Sacuanjoche, Nicaragua]." For Carrie, her identity as a good person was grounded in the health of her relationships to others and in her membership in a community. In practicing social reflexivity, she could evaluate not only the state of her congregation's relationship to Sacuanjoche but her own progress as a moral human being.

Two Congregations, Two Approaches to Reflection

How do these practices of personal and social reflexivity shape post-travel narratives? To illustrate, I compare two teams from structurally similar but

ideologically contrasting congregations. Each congregation chose to work with either Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity because the philosophy of the organization matched the interests of the congregation, not because either church had some existing connection to Nicaragua. That is to say, I present two "best case scenarios" for the transmission of organizational practices of reflexivity: two groups predisposed to take hold of and run with the styles of meaning making encouraged by their respective facilitating agencies.

West Church and Fellowship UCC were both medium-to-large congregations with multiple pastors and diverse programs, including a variety of "mission trip" opportunities. Before travel, the leaders of both teams told me they were looking for an opportunity to watch a community grow and develop over time. In 2009, I joined each group during its second trip to Nicaragua. As of this writing (2013), both congregations continued to work with their respective organizations, suggesting that each continued to value the mission and goals of the organizations and the opportunity to return to a community over time.

Congregational theology and objectives for travel contrasted with one another. West Church was an Evangelical congregation where members embraced many socially and politically conservative values. Fellowship UCC, on the other hand, was a liberal mainline congregation where, as the pastor joked during the 2009 trip, its three-year-olds shouted out Obama's 2008 campaign slogan: "Yes, we can!" As for trip goals, West Church's team of mostly repeat travelers emphasized spiritual development and material aid, while the team from Fellowship UCC included mainly first-timers who spoke of interpersonal connections and social justice.

West Church Reflecting

West Church was a vibrant Evangelical church in suburban northern Georgia. Its two pastors and seven staff oversaw diverse programs, including hosting an immigrant congregation, operating a preschool, and offering a variety of "caring" and "service" ministries. The mission committee learned about Manos por Dios from a local newspaper article; it appeared to be just the "mission field" they were craving – a place where they could invest long-term and see the fruits of their engagement.

The Statement of Faith at West Church described the Bible as inerrant and infallible. In keeping with the congregation's Evangelical identity, the members I interviewed spoke openly and comfortably about the spiritual motivations behind their volunteer service. They also expressed conservative social and political views. For example, two women expressed distaste for what they saw as the U.S.'s fame-seeking, sexually permissive social climate. I also heard passionately conservative political views on issues including immigration, healthcare, social security, and economic policies.

In October 2009 I met a team of eleven from West Church at the Managua airport. Like many of my trips, this one included several family groups. There were two married couples including Sam and Allison, featured in Chapter Five. Allison's brother also came. Team leader Jeff brought his father Mike, who was from another state. West Church's two (male) pastors came, as did two women traveling alone, Nicole, who was well-traveled but experiencing her first volunteer trip, and Linda, who at 72 had already participated in mission trips more or less annually since the mid-1980s. Of the nine I interviewed before travel, all but Nicole had been on multiple mission trips in the past. Only Sam and Allison had traveled with Manos por Dios, however. Overall, the team was

familiar with the rhythms of religious volunteer travel if not of Manos por Dios. They also had a good sense of what to expect in Nicaragua, whether from stories told by Sam and Allison or from surfing the organization's extensive website.

Seeking God's Call

From the first prayer on Monday morning, I realized that West Church's style of expressing itself dovetailed neatly with Manos por Dios's vision of the spiritual purpose of travel. Trip leader Jeff, a sales executive at an auto firm, deftly unpacked an obscure scripture passage he chose especially for that moment. Jeff had his first experience with volunteer travel more than 25 years before, when he got involved with Teen Mission, International, an Evangelical short-term mission agency founded in 1971. Between that experience, his Baptist upbringing, and his work as a Sunday School teacher, Jeff was confident and at ease thumbing through scripture passages. He told the group that God had provisioned the team to meet some of the needs it would encounter over the next week. "Only God" knew whose needs the team was brought to Nicaragua to meet: the needs of Nicaraguans, the needs of staff of Manos por Dios or the needs of travelers themselves. Speaking to God in an intimate, conversational tone, he prayed

> You have selected each person individually to be on this trip…. And Lord we don't know the plans you have for us this week, and we don't know the plans you have for us two months from now. But I'm asking, Father, that you touch each one of us and help us intersect with new friends and people here.
>
> Open our eyes and hearts to what you would have us learn… instead of us calling to you, "Hey, God I'm over here, let's do what I want to do." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Here in a nutshell was the Manos por Dios model of spiritual transformation: God had a plan for *each person*. Travel created a special time and place to focus on God's

will, not the will of the traveler. In doing so, each person learned what God wanted for him or her. Each person had a chance to change the world by meeting the needs of him/herself and others. This opening prayer was a prelude to the kinds of reflection that the staff liaison Jen would lead over the course of the week. In fact, just an hour later she shared the story of the founding of Manos por Dios in language that echoed Jeff's sentiment. Paul's group originally planned to send funds to Haiti, but their fundraising progressed too slowly and their intended project fell through. When they ended up in Nicaragua instead, Paul was inspired to start Manos por Dios. Jen's explanation mirrored Jeff's: the team might have plans, but God's plans were greater. The team might not know those plans yet, but by opening their hearts to God's message, amazing things could happen.

Was a Calling Collective or Personal?

During devotions on the first evening of the October 2009 trip, the team held hands while each person offered a prayer. This group was not shy about praying; my left arm was numb by the time each person had his or her say. Several people asked God for personalized messages. One said, "Remind me what you want from me." Three other travelers used the plural voice, saying words to the effect of "we know you have a plan for us" and "allow us to be used for your purposes." I did not know if the intention behind the plural voice was to ask for a single goal the group could share or to ask that each member of the group discern a special purpose.

Jeff and his father Mike soon began to speak of a goal they thought the whole team could share: to minister to the ministers of Manos por Dios. Team members

willingly joined in praying for the young adult missionaries from the U.S. or for the Nicaraguan staff. However, Mike and Jeff rarely succeeded in turning the team's collective attention to discussion about this "shared" purpose. There were simply too many reminders of the individualist and Evangelical model of a personal relationship to God. For example, the second evening one of the West Church pastors, who happened to be fluent in three languages, decided to conduct his devotion in Portuguese to get the team used to hearing different languages. When someone asked how the group would understand the scripture, he replied in Portuguese. Manos por Dios liaison Jen never failed to turn an opportunity into a lesson. She interpreted the exchange as follows: "We're going to make our own meaning tonight. God's going to touch us all differently."

Nevertheless, Jeff thought that *maybe* God was calling the whole team to a shared meaning. He was impressed by the vision, poise, and work ethic of the young adults who hosted his team. On this trip, founder Paul was not present. Travelers observed instead a group of 20-25 year olds managing the complex rhythms of organizational life, including daily breakdowns or revisions of plans and periodic staff conflicts. The division of labor at Manos por Dios was such that travelers had relatively little exposure to the Nicaraguan staff, who managed ongoing development projects from behind closed office doors or in the field. When Jeff praised the vision and dedication of the young missionaries, his team members nodded in agreement. He proposed an idea: "Maybe our primary purpose on this mission trip – and maybe my purpose on this trip – isn't so much to help the people of Santa Inés, but more to be encouraging the missionaries who are here day to day and who live in this house."

Jen responded to this statement with gratitude while reminding travelers of the importance of interacting with people in the villages. The rest of the evening and the

next day's reflection veered away from Jeff's idea. However, Mike did get the group to "lay hands" on some of the missionaries (including a Nicaraguan couple) and pray for their respective ministries.

Thinking about Home while Abroad

On Thursday night, Allison's brother turned the group's attention to poverty in the U.S. He quoted scripture about Jesus' instructions to serve others, especially "the least of these" or those in most need. Then he related a story about giving money to two homeless teens in downtown Atlanta. He felt that by giving cash without engaging them in conversation, he had missed an opportunity to truly help. He closed his monologue by saying that in heaven "God asks two questions: What did you do for Jesus? And what did you do with all the gifts I gave you?" His story prompted a long, impassioned discussion of how to manage requests from people who seemed to be in need, especially beggars.

Behind this discussion was a worry that haunted many of the travelers I interviewed: how do Christians discern "real" needs from the needs people *think* they have? Sometimes that question focused on Nicaraguans in need; travelers from both organizations worked to distinguish between aid that would help *right now* and aid that would be long lasting. With this Manos por Dios team, the conversation that evening focused almost exclusively on encounters with homeless people in the U.S., and the puzzle that the group contemplated was how to discern the difference between people in need and people who exploited Christian generosity.

During travel with both organizations, I often heard volunteers make comparisons between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Just as often, they had difficulty talking

about poverty in the U.S. and poverty abroad in the same conversation. Mostly they saw poverty in the U.S. as incomparable to the "real poverty" found in Nicaragua. I heard this from both liberal and conservative travelers and from those interested in either individual or structural solutions to poverty. West Church's travelers, however, drew some of the starkest divisions between poverty in the U.S. and in the developing world. In the post-travel interview, I asked Jeff to describe U.S. or American culture after describing Nicaraguan culture. He said that poor people in other countries wanted to work and better themselves. "They don't mind putting in the time," he claimed. In contrast, he thought poor people in the U.S. felt entitled to support, especially those in "the less affluent ethnic areas" around Atlanta where he lived. Nicole made a similar claim in her post-travel interview:

> We don't have poverty like the rest of the world where people don't have a way out. Here [in the U.S.] many of the people in the ghettos are there out of laziness, alcoholism, or whatever. It's more or less their choice because our government does provide everything… in spite of what some politicians try to make you believe. People don't have to be poor in this country.

For Nicole, Jeff, and several other travelers with whom I spoke, the perceived attitudes of poor people in the U.S. stood in marked contrast to the perceived work ethic of Nicaraguans struggling to get by.

When Allison's brother turned the conversation from Nicaragua to the streets of downtown Atlanta, conversations about poverty shifted from "What can we do to help?" to "How can we be generous without being taken advantage of?" Nicole was torn between her conviction that many street beggars were scam artists and her belief that Jesus said it was wrong to ignore beggars. She described a news program that "calculated" that street people in Atlanta made hundreds of dollars a day "taking

advantage of the generosity of Christians" instead of looking for gainful employment. She also offered the only non-U.S. based anecdote of the night. As a frequent traveler, she had been warned not to give street children money in other countries. She had heard that parents would cripple their own children to make them seem more pathetic and needy. Pondering the discord between the intention of Christian charity and the lies and manipulations that are sometimes used to solicit that charity, Nicole asked the group: what is the Christian thing to do?

The West Church group came to no final consensus, but comments tended to affirm the idea that good intentions and efforts to meet *real* needs rather than stated desires were paramount. This attitude stood in stark contrast with claims made by travelers with Partners in Solidarity. Later in this chapter, I describe a conversation in which the team from Fellowship UCC concluded that acting contrary to a recipient's stated needs was a selfish way to be charitable. Nonetheless, West Church's members were concerned about how to discern what someone really needs. The answers proposed included acting on instinct and on a sense of God's will. Travelers also reassured themselves that God would understand their intentions even if they did not always make the best choices or if their actions had unintended consequences.

Shared Goals Underscoring Personal Insights

For the final group reflection of the 2009 West Church team, Sam read a scripture passage that urged Christians to encourage one another in the faith. "One of our missions here," he explained, was to encourage one another as well as "the young ladies and guys who are here" (meaning the U.S. missionaries on the Manos por Dios

staff). Sam embraced the idea that the team had a shared mission. He also clearly viewed faith as a deeply personal, even idiosyncratic, pursuit. Referring to the scriptures where the Apostle Paul wrote "words of encouragement in our faith," Sam concluded that it was important to internalize Paul's message "as individuals, personally." Even when embracing a shared sense of purpose, the West Church team framed experiences in an Evangelical discourse of personal spiritual journeys: each person must internalize the messages of the Bible individually, and God calls each one personally to a particular path.

On Saturday, the last night in country, there was no evening devotional. The Manos por Dios bus dropped off the team at an airport hotel after a day at the beach. Conversation over dinner was filled with pre-emptive nostalgia: remember that boy Daniel playing marbles with Sam? Wasn't it funny when so-and-so did such-and-such? The group spoke warmly about the past week and counted the things people looked forward to: husbands to greet, grandchildren to lavish with attention, a week without rice or beans. The team was more interested in hot showers, a good meal, and arranging 5 a.m. wake up calls than in putting a formal capstone on the week by a final rumination of what these memories *meant*. Among the messages conveyed in daily reflective talk, one was this: the work of crafting a capstone narrative and identifying a moral of the story was ultimately a task for each individual.

West Church Outcomes

Over the course of the week, the congregation spoke of several "lessons" that God might be teaching them in Nicaragua. Which of these themes, if any, followed the

travelers home – ministering to the missionaries, following God's call, discerning ways to meet "real needs," or some combination of the above? Between three and eight months after travel, I interviewed eight members of this group. Below, I summarize some of the conclusions they reached about their experience, including insights and action steps they specifically attributed to travel.

Jeff, the trip leader, said the week in Nicaragua was one of many experiences that affirmed his belief that U.S. culture had misplaced priorities when it came to valuing family and valuing money. He was raised to value relationships more than wealth. One way he planned to live out that commitment was by encouraging his congregation to stay connected to Manos por Dios. He believed the best way to develop long-term connections in Nicaragua was to support Manos por Dios staff who did the day-to-day work of maintaining relationships and achieving development goals. To that end, his family decided to sponsor a young adult missionary rather than a local high school student. The family sent a monthly donation for one employee's stipend.

Other travelers who were equally impressed by the organization took the more traditional route of donating to one of its ongoing projects. A recently retired football coach gave the organization money because compared to previous volunteer travel experiences, Nicaragua stood out as the only mission field where he wanted to return. Beyond the donation and the desire to return, however, he said travel had not had much influence in his daily life. Linda, the retired teacher, said religious volunteer trips kept her humble and reminded her that she could be happy without the "stuff" she desired but felt she could not afford. Despite her frugality and despite her deep commitments to a community in Mexico she had traveled to for more than twenty years, Linda was inspired to make a large donation to Manos por Dios. Using money from a recent

inheritance, she fully funded the construction of a playground to accompany the school her team helped to build.

I asked what inspired this specific and generous donation. She told me she believed God had a special calling for each person and that hers was twofold: to care for children and to support international missions. She argued that God put her in Nicaragua at the perfect time to use her gifts. It was just after she had come into some money and right when Manos por Dios was building a brand new school in need of equipment. The idea that each person had a special calling was clearly a long-standing facet of Linda's identity. In our pre-travel interview, she had described using the same explanation when friends criticized her for focusing her generosity on a village in Mexico rather than within the U.S.

Other team members were impressed by the organization but less motivated to act. The associate pastor, an immigrant himself, was eager to inspire his flock to do more missions anywhere they were called; his own energies in that regard were largely directed toward his home country (Brazil). First-time traveler Nicole had some ideas, but they were half-hearted and hampered by her busy schedule. She suspected she would be more motivated to do something if it could be personal, like sponsoring one of the girls she met or giving "seed money" for a garden plot in someone's home. She acknowledged even that much effort was unlikely, since she had not even been able to find the time to sort through her pictures and send back favorites to Nicaragua as she had promised to do.

Two more experienced travelers noted the diminishing value that religious volunteer travel was bringing to their lives. Sam and his wife Allison told me that these trips always reminded them to dial back extravagant or wasteful spending. They had

reservations about a perceived lack of spiritual focus at Manos por Dios, and Sam's bad back made physical labor difficult. Sam told me his desire to help people came from God and that he was not feeling called back to Nicaragua. Allison wanted to travel more but was unsure if Nicaragua would be a destination. For now, she said that she prayed regularly for the people there.

Fellowship Reflecting

Fellowship UCC was a large mainline congregation in Arizona. In 2009 the congregation had just under 1,000 members. Four weekly services offered variety in terms of timing, formality of worship, and style of music. The church employed three pastors and thirteen staff, hosted two immigrant congregations on its multi-building campus, and was closely involved in the day-to-day operations of a retirement community and a daycare center that it helped to found. In contrast to West Church, Fellowship was non-creedal (not requiring statements of faith). The church website described Fellowship as part of a "progressive religious movement" and welcoming of openly gay or lesbian members.

The co-pastors of Fellowship were looking for an international mission that did not feel like a "mission trip." They knew of Sarah through denomination-level work they had done together in the past. Sarah's organization and her theology seemed like a good fit for a group looking to develop interpersonal cross-cultural connections that might subvert both secular and religious histories of dominance and injustice between the U.S. and developing countries.

The July 2009 trip included ten U.S. travelers, five of whom were members of Fellowship UCC. The other five were Pastor Kristen's adult daughter, Sarah and I, and our two spouses. From pre-travel interviews I knew that the team members from Fellowship had been thinking about the opportunities and challenges of international relationship for some time. I heard words like partnership, relationship, brother/sisterhood, and connection. Marisol was a literacy program coordinator in her early thirties taking her first trip outside the country. She argued that travel was better than sending a donation because "my time and myself are the most intimate, precious things I can give to anyone. They are more important than money."

Forty-something reporter Carrie told stories for a living. She believed learning and sharing other people's stories could catalyze future generous action. The stories of the first Fellowship team inspired her to travel. She hoped to use her special skill set of close listening, distilling, and retelling others' stories in order to create a documentary about life in Sacuanjoche, the partner community in Nicaragua. By telling her story, she hoped to "motivate somebody to get involved down there… or just get involved period."

Team members also anticipated wrestling with questions about justice and inequality. I asked Kristin why mission trips had been an integral part of her ministry. She traced the transformative power of travel to the moment when "a person of privilege sees how other people live." She hoped that through Partners in Solidarity, Fellowship could provide its members with a model for generosity that took into account issues of power and privilege. Carrie echoed this sentiment when she argued that mission trips should be empowering to local hosts, providing not a "hand-out" but a "hand up." She argued that by providing money, physical labor, and "connections and

partnerships," travelers could "jumpstart" local efforts that she hoped would be self-sustaining eventually.

Other team members were less certain that travel would be helpful for local Nicaraguans. Retired sales associate Paula was "reserving the right to decide if in fact I agree or disagree" with short-term humanitarian travel as a general practice. Her informal research on such travel left her cautiously optimistic, and she hoped that her own travel experience would settle her misgivings. Justin, a biologist and former university professor, was even more hesitant. Twice during our interview he stopped to rephrase a response that he thought sounded too "imperialistic" or "paternalistic." He paid attention to the ways subtle differences in wording might imply different kinds of power dynamics between travelers and Nicaraguans. Ultimately, Justin's distaste for "mission trips" was quelled by his conviction that Fellowship's goal was "to help [residents of Sacuanjoche] achieve whatever goals they have set forth for themselves."

Before stepping foot in Nicaragua, the Fellowship UCC team chose Partners in Solidarity because it wanted to wrestle consciously with questions about justice, inequality, and having fellowship across gaps in wealth and nationality. Team members had a year to familiarize themselves with the language of Partners in Solidarity: partners, not tourists; solidarity, not charity. Finally on the ground in Nicaragua, they could try to match these ideas to practices.

Learning to Think like Partners

The team arrived on a Saturday evening. Reflection happened each night, and during the first evening Sarah explicitly identified this time as an opportunity to process the

events of the day and to figure out how to make meaning out of an overwhelming array of experiences. She also encouraged everyone to write in the journals she prepared for them. She saw journals as a way for people to keep track of the rhythm of the days and the order of events that might otherwise blur together.

After a night in a *posadita* (a little inn), the team drove four hours north to the mountains of Matagalpa where its partner community was located. For the purposes of this study, I call this village Sacuanjoche after the national flower of Nicaragua. Sacuanjoche had 55 families living in 45 homes perched on a mountainside with no electricity and inconsistent availability of potable water. It was inaccessible by road, so the team slept at the nearby coffee plantation, Aldeas Cafés, where Partners in Solidarity also worked. Sacuanjoche had a preschool and elementary school, both built by the Nicaraguan government. It also had a rough wooden structure only partially walled on two sides where church was held two or three times a week. No one from Fellowship had actually seen Sacuanjoche in person. During the first team's tour of Partners in Solidarity operations, an excursion to the community was taken off the schedule due to rain and the low spirits of the travelers at that time. This second trip had two goals: to explore a partnership and to begin construction on a new church building/community center for the village, to be paid for by Fellowship UCC.

During reflection the first two nights, Sarah and her husband directed the team's conversations toward refining an understanding of the kinds of relationships team members wanted to form with the people of Sacuanjoche and Aldeas Cafés. For instance, Sarah's closing prayer the first night used the local favorite sport – baseball – as a metaphor for the trip. She prayed, "Loving creator, you have thrown us a curve ball. We've decided to play catch. Thank you for the gift of the opportunity to join the game

of life and abundant life with a team that we've never met but with whom we are already family. May we play well."

Sarah described Fellowship and Sacuanjoche as strangers yet *already* family implicitly bound by responsibilities to care for one another. The word "gift" similarly evoked a sense of desirable obligation to "give back" and remain bound together. The baseball metaphor also allowed Sarah to underscore the collective nature of ties. Travelers were representatives of the Fellowship congregation "team," which would work together to be "family" to the Sacuanjoche community, which in turn had its own collective set of interests and needs.

Along with these defining metaphors of team, gift, and family, Sarah and her husband reminded the team that the physical project of building a church was not the "real work" of travel. "Our work this week is really relationship," Sarah explained. "They can build a church without us, but they can't build relationship without us…. Getting to know each other is not going to happen unless you're risking one-on-one conversations."

As I discussed in Chapter Four, staff from both organizations emphasized the importance of building rapport with local Nicaraguans. However, the staff of Manos por Dios built schedules around projects, leaving rapport to a traveler's personal initiative. Partners in Solidarity built in time for conversation, from formal meetings with community leaders to home visits to the constant availability of translators on the work site. They also used reflection time as a space to praise those who built rapport during the day or to brainstorm ways to do so the next morning.

For example, on the second night, the conversation turned to speculation about the construction work, its meager progress, and the team's general lack of physical fitness.

Sarah's husband remarked that the construction projects existed to facilitate "what we're really here about," which was relationships. He reminded them of an activity from that afternoon. Pastor Kristen and her daughter sat with the children of Aldeas Cafés and a series of photos from the previous trip. They asked the children to identify the people in the photos. Children got duplicates of pictures of themselves or family members, and Kristen began keeping a record of names and faces her congregation could match together. The congregation would pray for and think about these people between trips. Those kinds of activities, Sarah's husband explained, showed just how good Fellowship could be at building relationships.

Projects as a Measurement of Relationship Progress

For Fellowship, the first two days of reflection included a clear lesson: any interaction, no matter how small, could be lifted up as a stand-in to measure the health of their nascent partnership with Sacuanjoche. Small wonder, then, that the week's central activity of building a church became the focal point for many conversations this team had about the nature of the relationships that they hoped to build with the residents of Sacuanjoche.

In a discussion early in the week, the team asked itself if building a church was the right thing to do. On the one hand, travelers wanted to honor the wishes of the Sacuanjoche leaders who requested a church. On the other hand, they knew not all residents of Sacuanjoche belonged to this church, and they strongly disagreed with many of the teachings its Assemblies of God pastor espoused. Every person on the team could name a project that they believed would make a greater measurable dent in the

deprivation of the community than a church, including building a road, improving sanitation, or founding a vocational training program. None of these ideas changed the facts that Fellowship had already spent $8,000 and the bricks, sand, and gravel were already purchased. Pastor Kristen reminded the frustrated team that listening to local voices was an important precept of partnership.

On Wednesday night after two days of digging in the mud, Sarah praised the group for pouring their efforts into a project that discomfited them. She said the project embodied the difference between charity and solidarity, and she further explained:

> One difference [between charity and solidarity] is who holds the decision-making power. I really do believe there aren't too many teams that would be willing to come into an area this poor, with this much need, and build something as seemingly unnecessary as a church, simply because the group asked for it…. It really meant you had to give up some of your values, some of your decision-making power. It's a really huge act of solidarity whether you know it or not. Because charity's all about the giver deciding: When? How much? What? Where?

One person suggested that "taken to extreme, charity could be called selfish, because it's an aggressive way of getting your own interests. You're not really understanding the site. You have to make a difference between you and who you're helping. You have to come to an agreement." Justin completed this thought: "To understand that it's not for you, it's for them. Certainly we benefit, but that's not why we're here."

The conversation powerfully affirmed the project itself and the team's sense of moral purpose. It situated the church project within a core Partners in Solidarity value: Nicaraguan leaders should choose their own projects "even if it doesn't make sense to us," as Sarah put it. In fact, acting against their instincts brought to life the conviction articulated by both Justin and Carrie in pre-travel interviews that the team's role was to

empower people in Nicaragua and to make it possible for them to achieve their own dreams.

This conviction was further reinforced by one of the quotes in Sarah's journal that distinguished between *dreaming together* and *dreaming for* another. By deferring their own dreams of clean water systems and adult literacy programs, Fellowship team members could describe themselves as avoiding the mistake of *dreaming for* their partner village. Evening reflection turned Partners in Solidarity teams to the same thorny questions time and again: What is our objective? Who are we doing this for? What will the consequences of our actions be? By asking and reviewing these ideas, by connecting the day's action to abstract principles, and by repeatedly refining the language used to describe their relationship to the people of Sacuanjoche, the Fellowship team practiced a form of social reflexivity that crafted a shared narrative of the meaning of travel. That narrative was not focused on transforming the spiritual lives of Nicaraguans (as per Brian Howell's narrative of mission) or on personal transformations of travelers or hosts (as the Manos por Dios narrative advocated). Instead, team members shared a narrative that insisted that any change inspired by travel would be mutual and would shape the learning and growth of both Fellowship UCC and the people of Sacuanjoche.

Fellowship Outcomes

Fellowship team members took both individual and corporate lessons from their time in Nicaragua. To a person, the travelers with Fellowship could name specific goals or actions they had taken to further their congregation's investment in a cross-cultural

partnership. Ultimately, the congregation decided to sign a partnership agreement, and Kristen, Carrie, and Paula returned with a rotating group of newcomers in 2010, 2011, and 2012.

Carrie and Paula became close friends after rooming together on the trip. Both said the trip satisfied their sense of themselves as people who reached out to others in need. Carrie said she was more likely to donate when asked to help a good cause, but she was also more likely to pay attention to what an organization planned to do with her donations. She was also inspired to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. She was the only Partners in Solidarity traveler I interviewed who claimed her trip inspired a specific change in her volunteering habits at home.

Paula told me that she used "to give and give and give" impulsively to charitable causes. "Thank God for Sarah Mitchell," Paula explained, "She's so good about teaching us that that's not the way to do it." After her trip, she felt like her donations became more thoughtful and better directed toward what was "really needed." Pastor Kristen said that getting to know the women of Sacuanjoche added a level of personal investment to her already-existing political commitments and donation patterns. The hot topic of immigration reform in Arizona became more urgent to her, though her opinion that immigrants should receive amnesty had not changed.

Paula saw her primary responsibility as generating enthusiasm for the Nicaraguan ministry within her large and widely committed congregation. She asked me rhetorically, "How do we get the church to want to be involved? And to really be involved, not just to say it and then have a handful of people have to carry the torch." By helping with a large fundraiser and sharing her story, she hoped to help generate the "buy-in" necessary to continue the partnership even if some of the original team

members could not participate. She said that if the church could not find new, vocal supporters, she would caution the congregation not to commit to a continuing partnership.

Her caution was warranted. Justin pulled away from the program as work responsibilities increased, though he continued to contribute financially. For ten months Marisol threw herself wholeheartedly behind the cause of Sacuanjoche, and then a personal tragedy sapped her passion for the program. Marisol's homecoming was dramatic; a panic attack sent her to the emergency room a week after her return. She felt out of control and "grossed out" by the materialism and pace of her lifestyle after being exposed to such poverty in Nicaragua. She said that the only way to help quell her feelings of disgust was to ask herself, "If I have a problem with poverty, what can I do to help people who are in it?" She threw herself into the Nicaragua ministry, becoming Fellowship's "point person" for the trips, learning about the logistics of budgeting trips, booking housing and drivers, and holding fundraisers. Then Marisol went through a difficult breakup that separated her from the stepdaughter who had been an important motivator for her involvement in Nicaragua. Between emotional upheaval, increased work responsibilities, and the difficulties of raising funds for travel she could otherwise not afford, Marisol's direct involvement in travel and in promoting the Nicaraguan mission tapered off.

Two of the team members had more sustaining post-trip connections to Nicaragua. Carrie brought the narrative of partnership and corporate change home to her congregation. She cut an eight-minute video that contrasted the goals of construction and relationship building, ultimately declaring, "We accomplished our goal of laying a foundation for relationships." Sharing this video in worship transmitted the

lessons and language of the team's daily reflection to other Fellowship members. She made another video featuring friends and members of the Fellowship church as a way to bring a piece of their congregation to the people of Sacuanjoche. Since 2009, Carrie and Paula have spearheaded fundraising efforts by writing grant applications and organizing an annual wine tasting. Carrie brought more expensive and extensive documentary equipment on her trips in 2010 through 2012. Her storytelling gifts continued to build a bridge between two distant communities. Her ear for language and narrative effectively captured the messages produced by the team's social reflexivity, packaging them in an accessible way for the larger Fellowship community to absorb.

The Power of Reflection

Daily reflection is perhaps the most powerful meaning-making practice of travel. During these conversations, organization staff lead travelers in the creation of narratives that make sense out of the travel experience. The narratives they formulate and the words and phrases they adopt during travel follow volunteers home.

For Manos por Dios travelers, these narratives were deeply personal. The West Church team's reactions to travel paralleled those of other Manos por Dios travelers with one exception. On other teams, I heard more stories about the impact of travel on their sense of self. I describe some of these stories in the next chapter. For now, I want to highlight the power of personal reflexivity to draw attention *away* from collective goals and enterprises. Jeff and Mike repeatedly invited their teammates to share in a collective sense of purpose: to minister to the missionaries of Manos por Dios. While others responded agreeably during the trip, in the months following travel few

remarked on this shared goal. Instead, travelers spoke about how their specific talents or interests could be used to further God's will or, for the less spiritually inclined, to further the poverty alleviation efforts of Manos por Dios.

For the team from Fellowship UCC, social reflexivity called attention to a shared sense of purpose and to the many ways travelers' actions might impact an ongoing relationship with Sacuanjoche. While a few travelers described personal changes made after the trip, every team member I interviewed after travel also spoke of a shared goal of strengthening the congregation's relationship with its partner community by getting non-traveling peers excited about Nicaragua and by maintaining good communication with Sacuanjoche between trips.

As a practice that is overtly about *making meaning*, reflection is central to travelers' understanding of the experience of religious volunteer tourism. For researchers and practitioners interested in the power of travel to inspire the development of prosocial attitudes and actions at home after the travel experience, the centrality of reflective talk may give pause. Based on my observations, neither style of reflection did a good job of helping travelers make comparisons between the causes of poverty in the U.S. and in Nicaragua or between poverty alleviation efforts in the U.S. and in developing countries. As travelers defined poverty in Nicaragua by contrasting it to poverty in the U.S., their narratives of the purpose and outcomes of travel remained cognitively distant from their attitudes about working to fight poverty in the U.S.

The Manos por Dios narrative of personal transformation encouraged travelers to think of themselves as morally upright and generous people. Travelers carried this identity with them across social settings. Yet they also talked about the morality of the people they hoped to help. In Chapter Five, I described their interventions for boys and

girls with great potential. Above, I related how Nicole and Jeff imagined Nicaraguans' desire for an opportunity to earn their keep. They contrasted these imagined Nicaraguans with imagined U.S.-based poor people (implicitly, people of color). The moral deservingness of intended aid recipients mattered to an episodic approach to poverty alleviation because such an approach emphasized the gifts, talents, and efforts of specific individuals, both generous donors and deserving aid recipients who could overcome adversity.

The practice of social reflexivity employed by Partners in Solidarity resulted in travelers spending more time actively discussing the meaning of their cross-national relationships. They contemplated issues of inequality and social justice. More often than their Manos por Dios counterparts, these travelers saw poverty in the U.S. as a problem with structural causes and solutions that was steeped in histories of racism and classism. Yet the embedded orientation that guided daily reflection fastened the focus of Partners in Solidarity travelers on the particular histories and social contexts that contributed to poverty in their partner communities. When they returned home, they associated travel with the particular goals of fighting poverty *in those Nicaraguan communities.* Paula, Kristen, and Carrie each named broadly applicable lessons they took from travel about, for example, how to be generous or how to think about immigration policy in the U.S. For the most part, however, when they talked about actions they had taken since travel, those actions were centered on growing their congregation's partnership with Sacuanjoche. If Fellowship travelers described to me participation in volunteer or advocacy work in their home community, these comments were separate from our discussions of their travel experience.

Some Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity volunteers did begin new volunteering opportunities in response to their travel experiences. Carrie joined Habitat for Humanity, and an education professor on a Manos por Dios team began teaching at a local prison after learning that its inmates had contributed to a Manos por Dios micro-enterprise project. The practices of reflexivity do not *preclude* travel from inspiring greater local outreach. However, it would be inappropriate to claim that travel causes post-travel outreach. Rather, Carrie and others described travel as influencing local outreach in spite, not because, of their exposure to episodic or embedded orientations toward travel.

Chapter Nine: Transforming or Renewing?

Ed had taken four volunteer tourist trips since his retirement, three with Manos por Dios in Nicaragua. He looked forward to returning each year. When I asked if he "came home with any goals or maybe hopes" after his latest trip, he demurred:

> I would say probably not…. When I get back home, I probably don't reflect a whole lot. I think that while we're there I get satisfaction out of helping people or feel like I'm doing, maybe doing the world a little bit of good. But once I get back home, I pretty much fall right back into my routine.

Ed's hesitant words revealed both his awareness of and his unease with the popular belief that volunteer travel is meant to inspire deep reflection or personal transformations in attitudes or behavior. Ed preferred action to contemplation and believed travel could be satisfying and worth repeating without being dramatic or seeping into the fabric of daily life. Yet he was well aware that volunteer travel is packaged and marketed as a transformative experience. Ed's use of "probably" and "maybe" reflected a tension between his assessment of the value of travel and the messages he heard linking travel to some kind of personal transformation. His story is far from the only one inconsistent with a change-driven analysis of volunteer travel.

The usual mode of analyzing a transformative narrative of travel is to measure changes in an individual's attitudes or behaviors. Typically, studies of travel reveal the "good news" that travel increases some desirable trait (volunteering, cultural sensitivity), the 'bad news" that these traits do not change, or the headline news that travel actually results in negative changes: *decreased* tolerance or collateral damage to hosts of travel.

In part, this chapter tells a similar story. I address some familiar concerns: Are travelers reporting changes? What kinds of change do they report? However, my focus here is not on the fact of change but rather on travelers' use of change as a moral motif in their lives. All travelers are exposed to the idea that religious volunteer travel is inherently a transformative experience, but not all travelers report experiencing such changes. This chapter asks whether factors such as age, social context, and an episodic or embedded orientation to travel put volunteer tourists in a position to be open or resistant to change narratives in travel. I also ask whether travelers leverage claims of change or its lack into self-assessments of their moral worth. In answering these questions, I step aside from strong distinctions between episodic and embedded orientations, looking instead at how such orientations work alongside other characteristics in shaping claims about the meaning of travel and about moral selfhood.

Sociologist Rebecca Allahyari explains how volunteering helps people craft a sense of themselves as morally good. People craft "moral selves" through practices much like those of volunteer tourists: through listening to and repeating the meaning-making narratives of organizations and through physical and emotional labor.[1] In Allahyari's study, volunteers come to internalize these narratives and craft moral selves over sustained, long-term involvement with a particular volunteer organization. The volunteer tourists I have studied also used narratives, physical tasks, and emotional interactions to create a sense of moral selfhood. The nature of their short-term travel dictates that they do so not through routine but through the *absence* of routine.

[1] Allahyari, *Visions of Charity*.

For many of these travelers, the physical and cultural distance achieved through international travel also offers critical distance from their daily lives. By stepping outside those routines, they can better "see" and evaluate the values and commitments that underlie their routine actions. As a sociologist, I immediately saw parallels between these travelers' stories and Bourdieu's concept of a *habitus.* Bourdieu argues the practices of daily life are shaped by dispositions, habits, tastes, and skills that are socially acquired. These elements make up a habitus that both limits what kinds of courses of action are plausible to people and equips people to act strategically. For Bourdieu and other practice theorists, practices are not strategic because they are the product of a conscious, rationally calculated decision. Rather, they effectively respond to a particular set of circumstances within the constraints of a particular habitus and a particular set of unspoken assumptions about how the world works.

By leaving their familiar milieu, travelers had the option of looking back at that milieu and evaluating their progress in embodying the moral selves they hoped to become. They were encouraged to spend time asking themselves: What *kind* of a good person do I think I am? How am I embodying that goodness? (Such questions were rarely posed so explicitly, however.) Reflections on these themes assessed the links between consciously held values and the values travelers believed their actions expressed. Some travelers felt completely transformed by a sense of calling to some new, nobler purpose in life, shifting both values and behaviors in redefining their moral identities. Others saw continuity between their values and their behaviors, describing travel as a chance to "express," "renew," or "deepen" their commitments. Many fell somewhere between the two extremes. They saw places where their actions fell short of their ideals or saw gaps between their own values and the "American" lifestyle in which

they participated. For them, travel might be a "reminder" of what is "really important" and an opportunity to recalibrate their behavior to better align their actions with some higher moral purpose.

To examine the engagement of travelers with the idea of transformative travel, I begin this chapter with an overview of their claims about change in various areas of life, such as spiritual growth, politics, and economic decision-making. Among the respondents, there was no association between being a first-time traveler and claiming transformation, despite the fact that many repeat travelers believed their first trips were the most transformative. Turning to travelers' more nuanced narratives, I find that some travelers are better positioned than others to change their actions to suit their adopted values. Apart from any particular travel experiences, younger travelers and those approaching major life transitions, such as childbearing or retirement, may be better able to achieve changes in values or behaviors that provide evidence of a "life-changing" travel experience. Ultimately, however, I find that the interest of travelers in questions of transformation center not on the fact of change but rather on the act of assessing or affirming the congruence between their values and actions.

Asking about Change: An Overview of Responses

In post-travel interviews, I learned about shifts in the attitudes and behaviors of travelers through direct questions about change and through their spontaneous stories. When asked about change directly, many travelers offered abstract assessments of changed personalities or worldviews, leaving out the rich, specific examples that came out during spontaneous stories about volunteering for Habitat for Humanity,

fundraising for Manos por Dios, or purging an over-stuffed closet. Rather than focus on such details, responses to questions about change or its lack constructed a holistic view of travel as a meaningful episode within the lives of travelers.

In this section, I examine answers to a series of questions about whether travel changed the ways volunteers thought or acted in regard to six specific areas of their lives. First, I asked whether travelers came home from their trips with any goals or hopes. Next, I asked about areas of their lives that might have been affected by travel, including their spiritual life, relationships with family or friends, views on politics, opinions about immigrants in their community, economic decision-making about day to day expenditures or charitable donations, and what they do with their free time, including volunteer work. I take the often-wordy responses to these questions and boil them down to a simple dichotomy: yes, this area changed in some way or no, this area did not. I do so not to offer some statistical assessment of the kinds of change travelers report but rather to convey some broad information: What proportion of travelers reported changes? Did they report pervasive changes impacting multiple aspects of their daily lives or focused changes targeting some aspects of life more than others?

Before presenting this data, I offer two caveats. First, the responses of travelers to these questions were more diverse than the change/no change dichotomy seems to suggest. Many travelers emphasized that "change" was the wrong word for the low-intensity experience they described, preferring terms like "increased awareness" or "deepening of commitments." Thus, two travelers might describe the same activity – such as talking about travel with their spouse – as *changing* or *not changing* their relationships with family members. In categorizing these answers, I took the self-assessments of travelers to heart. If they described a specific attitude or action as a

departure from the past, no matter how subtle, I characterized that area as having changed.

Second, social desirability bias played a role in answers. As I will describe in greater detail below, travelers expected me to *want* stories of change. Moreover, the litany of questions forced some into the uncomfortable position of saying no over and over again. I always began this set of questions by suggesting that some people change and others do not. Still, remarks during the interviews made it clear that some travelers felt they were disappointing me or even "skewing" my data by giving negative responses. Perhaps because of this bias, several travelers made initial claims of change but offered contradictory explanations. For example, they would qualify that they thought the changes were due to changing life circumstances rather than the trip itself. In these cases, I chose to code responses as "no change" based on their explanations.

Table 1: Percentage of travelers claiming change by number of trips

	First-time Travelers (N=15)	Repeat Travelers (N=38)	Overall (N=53)
No changes	13%	13%	13%
Changes in one or two categories	80%	55%	62%
Changes in three or more categories	7%	32%	25%

Overall, self-reported change was common among U.S. respondents. It was also more modest than the trope of "transformative travel" might imply. Table 1 compares first-time travelers and repeat travelers from both organizations, indicating whether they reported no changes, changes to only one or two areas of life, or changes to three or more categories. Most travelers (87 percent) reported some level of change, but that

change was generally limited to one or two areas. There was no difference between first-time and repeat travelers in terms of reporting change or its lack. However, first-time travelers reported changes in *fewer* areas than repeat travelers did. It may be that with repeat exposure to the narrative-constructing practices of daily reflection and post-travel reporting, repeat travelers have internalized a message of transformation more fully than first-timers. As I will report below, however, the most dramatic reports of transformation came after the initial trip; for those first-timers who experience dramatic change, perhaps the impact of that change dilutes the memories of other, less central changes.

Table 2: Percent of travelers claiming change by areas of life affected

	Manos por Dios (N=38)	Partners in Solidarity (N=17)
Faith life	55%	47%
Relationships*	47%	24%
Politics	21%	29%
Immigration**	17%	7%
Giving/spending	47%	47%
Volunteering***	25%	24%

* N=34 for *Manos por Dios*
** N=29 for *Manos por Dios*; N=15 for Partners in Solidarity
*** N=36 for *Manos por Dios*

Table 2 compares the responses of travelers to questions about the six areas of change listed above by the organizations with which volunteers traveled. No one category dominates the descriptions of the impact of religious volunteer travel on their lives. In fact, only one cell shows a slim majority of travelers reporting change: the reports of Manos por Dios travelers on changes to their faith life. If religious volunteer tourism were considered a universally spiritual experience, then people might be

expected to report even higher rates of spiritual growth or change than they currently do. In contrast, many respondents actually denied that spirituality had anything to do with their interest in travel. Instead, they pointed to the pleasure they received serving others or bonding with teammates. The other most common response was to report changes in charitable giving or leisure spending. Travelers from both groups reported similar rates of change in these two arenas. Below, I explain how the destination of a poor, foreign community directs the attention of volunteer tourists specifically to questions about materialism, waste, and spending habits.

Travelers reported relatively modest rates of change in political opinions. This result parallels Wuthnow's insight that churches engaged in international charity are still unlikely to engage actively with issues that may be seen as too political, such as peace making.[2] Travelers with the more politically motivated Partners in Solidarity reported higher proportions of change in this area than did travelers with the service-oriented Manos por Dios (30 percent vs. 21 percent). Few Partners in Solidarity travelers reported changed positions on immigration, however. Their answers suggested that most already supported significant reforms to immigration laws before travel; the overtly political messages that they heard during Partners in Solidarity trips were compatible with their support for reform.

These results may be surprising in light of the literature on teen and young adult travelers, which argues that travel increases civic engagement such as volunteering. However, I proposed in the previous chapter one possible explanation for a relatively low report of change in volunteering behavior: namely, that meaning-making practices

[2] Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*.

experienced during travel may not be a strong basis for acting at home. Interactions with poor people abroad do not necessarily build up the kinds of social bridges that would connect people to a world of volunteering and civic engagement at home. Below, I offer another explanation that is equally compelling. Active volunteers appear to be more likely to travel, and travelers who already volunteer at home are likely to keep doing so. Many of these respondents were already volunteering "at capacity," as one of them put it. Simply put, few respondents had the time or energy to *increase* their volunteering commitments as a result of their intensive travel experiences.

Many of the questions I asked prompted interviewees to think about the impact of travel on their own lives. Travelers from both organizations reported an array of multifaceted impacts. This result suggests that travelers from both organization may have internalized the popular idea of travel as *personally* transformative, a viewpoint advocated primarily by Manos por Dios. However, as travelers explained their responses, I perceived the influence of their respective organizational orientations towards either personal or corporate transformation. For example, most Manos por Dios travelers talked about spiritual changes in terms of their prayer life or relationship to God. In contrast, several Partners in Solidarity volunteers reported spiritual changes in terms of their roles within their congregations. As they became advocates for the ministry to Nicaragua, their relationships to fellow congregants shifted.

Having described these broad responses to direct questions about change, I now turn to the more nuanced explanations of travelers. The next three sections describe three ways that travelers came to understand their experience in terms of transformation: as a dramatic change, a lack of change, or a subtle renewal or recalibration.

Three Ways to Approach the Subject of Transformation

Travelers were quick to point out that volunteer tourism is not some sui generis influence on their lives. It was part cause, part effect, and the impact of travel took place alongside other formative experiences, such as being of a certain age or life stage, participating in a Bible study, holding particular political views, or engaging in community outreach efforts. These respondents were well aware of the tangled threads of causality that led to and from their travel experiences. For example, one woman in her late fifties explained her take on the question of causality as follows:

> Maybe the trip tipped the scales on some things. I definitely am finding myself to be more patient now than I once was, but I can't say that that's Nicaragua. Is that age, or is that Nicaragua? I don't know, because I know that patience also comes with age, thank goodness.

Acknowledging this complication, volunteer tourists tended to describe the impact of travel in one of three ways: as a dramatic turning point, as an expression of their moral identity, or as a renewal or recalibration of self. In sixty-four post-travel interviews, fourteen respondents shared stories of dramatic change or changes that touched many facets of their lives. Fifteen spoke of travel as an event without "transformative" influence; some of these respondents were satisfied with this description, while others displayed unease at countering what they viewed as the dominant narrative of travel. The remaining majority of travelers spoke of renewal or recalibration of one's sense of place in the world.

Stories of Dramatic Change

Nineteen-year-old college student Stacey expected travel to change her life. In high school, she traveled to South Africa with 200 members of her non-denominational megachurch. "From the very first planning meeting," she gushed, "I was completely like, 'I have to go on this trip because my life will be changed if I go on this trip. Good things are going to come out of this trip. I need to go.'" Stacey's narration emphasized the extreme impacts that travel had on her life. She "had never been… had never thought about going on a mission trip before," but she knew in an instant she would travel. Why? "I can't explain it other than, like, a spiritual voice in my head saying, 'This is for you.'" She outlined for me the ways that her first trip transformed her consciousness and career goals. Her nascent interest in the restaurant industry was abandoned for a major in international relations, which she hoped to leverage into work on issues of human rights:

> Stacey: My dream is to either work for the United Nations or International Justice Mission, or I would love to become an international justice lawyer.
>
> LiErin: It's great that you have such a clear vision.
>
> Stacey: Yes. It was really, like, this wasn't even in my radar when I went to South Africa for the first time, and I came back, and I was like: "I can't see what I've seen and then just go on with my life."

A minority of travelers described experiencing dramatically life-altering change as a result of travel. Most of these travelers were young, in their teens to thirties, and most were approaching major life transitions, such as higher education or family formation. Like Stacey, most anticipated trips becoming important milestones in their lives even before they traveled.

For instance, a married couple in their mid-20s from Stacey's church were also deeply moved by a first mission trip to South Africa. They attributed their decision to

adopt a child internationally to witnessing "first-hand all these kids running around with absolutely nothing." Before their trip to South Africa, Emily and Jason had recently begun talking about starting a family. Their conversations about how soon and how many children were no doubt on Emily's mind when she joked to her girlfriends before the trip: "Let's just go, and we'll decide we're going to come home and adopt a kid."

Emily described the joke to me as a facetious, "off the cuff" remark, but the idea was at least on her radar before they left. Adoption "was definitely not originally the plan" for Jason and Emily, nor was it a response to the inability to have biological children. Instead, travel set them on an alternative path toward family formation. This goal of adoption influenced their trip to Nicaragua as well. When they heard that Manos por Dios had an association with an orphanage in Chinandega, they hoped to work there. "Not that their orphanage would be the same as the one our child will come from," Emily explained, "but we wanted to gain a different perspective on what our child might have had to deal with." When I interviewed the couple about three months after their Nicaragua trip, they had been approved for an adoption in Ethiopia and were waiting to be matched. They hoped their child would come home with them in time for Christmas of the following year.

These younger adults were each approaching major life transitions when the opportunity to travel – and to have a "life changing" experience – presented itself. For some older travelers, the appeal of a narrative of dramatic change contrasted favorably with the inertia of a relatively stable lifestyle. Ted was a small, gregarious man who worked in IT and whose international travel was limited to vacations in Cancun, Mexico, before he came to Nicaragua. He was a Christian and spoke about his faith with ease during group reflection, but his motivation for travel was personal, not spiritual. He had

graduated from high school with Paul, the founder of Manos por Dios. As Ted and Paul approached their 50th birthdays, Ted organized a group of buddies to come check out the exciting work Paul was doing in Nicaragua.

Ted enjoyed getting to spend time with his high school buddies working to help people, and he was awed by the scope and vision of the project his "prankster" high school friend had created. However, he was disappointed that his 24-year-old daughter, who accompanied him, did not "get into" the spirit of the trip in the ways he had hoped. "I kinda wanted it to be kinda a life-changing experience for her," he grimaced. Well aware of the concept of "transformative travel," Ted saw this trope as an experience aimed at transforming the lives of young people.

When Ted began to tell me about his own experiences, however, it became clear that he was trying on a transformative narrative of travel in a life with little room for change. He described wanting to get more involved in both Manos por Dios and his local community. In the next breath, he talked about how the trip made him want to pull back and re-examine a life where he worked 10-12 hour shifts for several days each week. He struggled to balance work and family time. For example, he apologetically asked to reschedule our first interview attempt. He had promised his girlfriend a quiet evening and a home-cooked meal after staying late at work several nights in a row. Going in to the trip, Ted knew that travel was described as impacting people's volunteering and social outreach. He also associated those transformative effects of travel with younger travelers. Somewhere in the process of experiencing travel for himself, and of experiencing Manos por Dios's narratives of personal transformation, Ted found himself adopting a narrative of transformation for his own life. However, that narrative was not a great fit for his current lifestyle, where what he needed was to reduce rather than

increase his time commitments outside of his family circle. He used the language of transformation while being consciously aware that he was not making much headway in making desired changes in his day-to-day behaviors.

Reporting No Changes

In Chapter Four I mentioned a woman named Inge and a man named Carl from Oklahoma. Carl told me that his trip with Partners in Solidarity was "far from a road to Damascus moment." He referred to the Biblical story of Paul's conversion to Christianity. In the story, Paul, a known detractor of Christianity, is traveling to Damascus when he sees a flash of light, hears the voice of God, and is struck blind for three days as a result. The image of a momentous event that takes place during a journey certainly fits well with the structure and popular accounts of mission travel. As Ted's story illustrates above, however, most adult travelers are unlikely to be in a position to accommodate a radical redefinition of their lives.

A soft-spoken, analytical man in his mid-50s, Carl volunteered with Habitat for Humanity but knew little about international volunteering. In early 2009, the company that had employed Carl for most of his career laid him off. Since his wife was not employed, this unexpected blow shook the foundations of their financial security. When I traveled with the couple in 2010, Carl spoke briefly about his hopes to make and sell handcrafted wooden furniture, a beloved hobby. His wife was more vocal about her concerns that his entrepreneurial efforts were moving all too slowly.

Theoretically, Carl's position as a first-time traveler in a transitional period of life with a partner but no dependent children to support might position him to be open

to a narrative that featured an experience of transformative change. When we spoke before the trip, however, he made it clear that he anticipated no such changes. His wife quipped that he was traveling because she "made him" come along. Carl's own thoughts focused on his role as a representative of his congregation. He spoke mainly about his doubts about the viability of an ongoing relationship. The congregation sent a team to Comarco Este the year before, and there had been no communication with the community in the interim. "For me, a relationship is two-sided," he explained, "but we don't hear from them."

Carl was frustrated by what he perceived to be a lack of effort by the Nicaraguans to communicate. His hopes for the trip were to gather information and to evaluate the likelihood of maintaining a meaningful and productive congregation-to-community relationship. Carl's social location positioned him to be available for a potentially transformative experience. However, he saw himself as a liaison rather than a seeker or a pilgrim. More than others on his team, Carl found inspiration and comfort in the embedded orientation that Sarah encouraged. As he embraced a more corporate definition of the goals of travel, he affirmed that his own experiences differed from the "Damascan" image of personal transformation.

Travelers with both Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity received a clear message: the desire to change Nicaraguans and not be changed oneself is either the naiveté of first-time travelers or a symptom of arrogant first-world paternalism. This message appears in the many op-ed articles and books from all ends of the theological spectrum that suggest there is a "right" and "wrong" way to do religious volunteer travel. It also showed up in a sentiment I heard many travelers use: "I went to give, and I received so much more than I could ever give."

Travelers who felt unchanged after their trips sometimes excused or even apologized for holding what they believed was an unusual stance. Above, I described a series of questions I asked about travel's impact on people's lives. As previously noted, while my question framing reminded travelers that some people change and others do not, remarks during the interviews made it clear that some travelers felt they were disappointing me or even "skewing" my data by giving negative responses. Like Ed whose story opened this chapter, many used hesitant or hedging language to describe their experiences. This is not to say that they disliked or were unsatisfied by their trips. They simply had difficulty managing the dissonance between their experiences and a received narrative of dramatic, personal change. This was true even for some travelers with Partners in Solidarity who had been exposed to an alternate narrative of travel's gradual and corporate impact on communities.

Carl's friend and fellow traveler Al described his own lack of change in a narrative of failure. Al told me, "I could do more. I could do more and I don't…. There are times when I would like to, but I'm just too lazy to do it, you know what I mean?" Like several of the retired travelers I interviewed, Al faced significant mobility and health challenges as well as a restricted income. Yet his response reflected neither the limits that his poor health placed on his activities nor the large financial contributions his family made to Partners in Solidarity or their local church. I learned of these contributions through conversations with his wife, who also traveled. Instead, Al focused on the dissonance between his expectation that travel was associated with large-scale, concrete changes and the reality that his everyday life has not changed in ways that were obvious to himself.

In contrast to this story, some travelers were able to assert confidently that travel had value even if it was not in any sense transformative. They did so in two main ways. Some contended that travel was a means of expressing one's altruistic nature, while others indicated that its purpose was to provide help to those in need without any thought to the traveler's own self-worth. Many repeat travelers described the experience of travel as one more way they could live out their commitment to being good people by doing good in the world. A dentist traveling with Manos por Dios for the second time explained, "I loved the experience. I would love to go again. Am I a changed person? No. I feel like I'm the same person I was before I went. I do community outreach and different things, and I do a lot within my own profession." In this man's story, travel was an outcome, not an initiation or an inflection point in his trajectory toward becoming a better person. It was one of several ways that this dentist acted out his internal commitment to social outreach and to using his professional skills for the good of others.

The ability to provide specialized medical aid might have helped this dentist see his trip as just one in a series of good works that he performs. Few travelers could provide services with such immediate, tangible results. The lawyers, teachers, homemakers, and accountants with whom he traveled could only provide unskilled labor that would clearly be provided more efficiently by local workers. In contrast to local Nicaraguans, the limited physical capacity of the travelers and their lack of familiarity with local construction and agricultural practices (such as hand mixing concrete or using water in a tube to find a level) often resulted in slow and uneven productivity and sometimes outright shoddy work.

In religious volunteer tourism, travelers' contributions to physical labor are not only inefficient; they raised ethical questions as well. Why use foreign labor when local volunteers would be better at the work, would be empowered by a sense of ownership, could gain marketable construction skills, and could even receive a small wage for their labor? Whether bringing in locals is empirically more efficient or whether it is more beneficial because of the byproducts of empowerment and vocational training are open questions. I raise the contrast between a dentist and other travelers because this kind of speculative process – "What is the "value added" of my presence here?" – informs self-assessments of volunteers' experiences. A doctor might more easily see the value of his or her contribution to Nicaraguan lives. In contrast, an unskilled volunteer such as Al could place far less weight on the value of his or her contribution to a building project. If that volunteer could find no alternate meaning in travel, such as a self-transformation, then he or she might similarly find no alternate meaning in a travel narrative that lacked a dramatic story of change.

One Manos por Dios traveler, Harold, actually turned the message of transformed travelers on its head, criticizing what he saw as "me-first philanthropy." Describing that mindset, he said that me-first philanthropists think, "I want to help somebody do something really good and noble, but really the reason I do it is because of how it impacts me, how I feel about the experience." Harold argued that travel should not be about what the traveler gets out of the experience. As he put it, "I'm much more about 'denial of self' and 'service to others'. I want to go and do something and watch the impact on other people. My take away is the not the primary goal."

Harold could not be accused of being naive about what volunteer tourism entails; he had taken at least two volunteer tourist trips to Central America each year

over a period of five years. Nor was he unaware of political or development concerns. He was better versed in Nicaraguan history and contemporary politics than most of the young adult missionary staff of Manos por Dios. Like many of the respondents, Harold believed that the satisfaction that travelers feel in helping others has a "selfish" component: that travel *should* be about others, but it provides many benefits to travelers as well. He also shared with many travelers the belief that empowerment of local leaders means equipping them with resources and getting out of their way. He worried that the "selfish" satisfaction of travel might prompt them to linger on and become paternalistic, doing things that Nicaraguans should be equipped to do themselves. His desire to help others was informed by an awareness of the counter-productivity of paternalism and of potential self-gratification in the guise of helping.

Yet Harold took these concerns in a direction that frustrated the staff of Manos por Dios. For instance, as his team's leader Harold tried to persuade the team that an extra two hours of work on their construction project would be a more valuable contribution than visiting a children's orphanage. Jen, the Manos por Dios liaison, saw weekly visits to the orphanage as an important relational ministry. She was visibly upset at Harold's efforts to sway the team away from such a visit. In the end, the team split, with a few going to the orphanage while the remaining members toured the construction site of a new Manos por Dios facility.

Ultimately, travelers who resisted a narrative of change operated against a tide of messages and practices designed to draw out new insights and behaviors among travelers. Instead of fitting their experiences to familiar narratives or delving into their own psyches during reflective conversation, these travelers found their own approaches. Sometimes those approaches created friction. For travelers who found a

narrative of change appealing but mismatched to their experience, that friction was internalized as guilt, dissonance, or downplaying travel's significance in their lives. For travelers satisfied with their non-transformative travel experiences, the friction occurred between travelers and the organizational staff who saw it as their job to guide travelers toward life-changing insights.

Travel as Renewal or Recalibration

Tina, the founder of an environmentalist non-profit organization, offered the clearest explanation of the "renewing" insights that physical and cultural distance from one's home can offer. Tina had been leading mission trips since 2001 when her college-aged daughter convinced her to travel with her to Haiti. She had since become an expert traveler and volunteer trip leader. When a work colleague told her about Manos por Dios and its incredibly affordable trips, she jumped at the chance to be "just" a follower. Tina was fascinated by my research. She frequently recommended to me books and training facilities and once brought my attention to a course on global missiology designed for lay church leaders. Over the years, she developed her own narrative of the meaning of travel for herself and for the teens she brought to Haiti. In our post-travel interview, we had the following exchange:

> LiErin: Well, my last set of questions is about how you think about these trips and how they affect you in your daily life here at home.[3]
>
> Tina: I thrive on bringing a new experience that I believe widens worldviews for teenagers. It's an experience where the teenagers will always look at things just

[3] Usually, this statement set up a list of questions, but Tina jumped right in. For clarity, I shorten her response, which included several tangents.

> a little different from having been there for however many days. My greatest challenge is to help U.S. teenagers distinguish between a want and a need. I really thrive on going into those cultures and serving, being totally unplugged for a number of days.
>
> So, those are really good, and turning opportunities that I put in my life once or twice a year. Ten to twenty days a year, I try to go and do that. It's a way to serve. It's a way to connect…. It's a real centering experience for me. God, it's a great place for me to go and get centered. It also constantly realigns what I need and what I want. And I think that's a real challenge to do in our culture. I think you have to step out of our culture to get that realignment frequently. Because things blur in our culture so quickly.

Later in the interview, Tina explained what she meant by the difference between "wants" and "needs." She said, "I have a little thing on my sink that says 'May I live simply, so others can simply live.' That's sort of a little motto for my life. I pretty much only buy things if they're on sale. I try to spend as little as I need to spend. I have a life that I think is enjoyable and comfortable, but I just can't even begin to go to the excessive." She continued, "And, I think that a lot of that is realigned every time I go into those cultures. Like, you don't need that. You can pull last year's summer purse out and be just fine!"

Many travelers echoed Tina's insights about wants and needs. A woman about Tina's age who was a fellow Manos por Dios traveler told me, "I'm more aware of how I waste money, if that makes sense. I'm more aware of how you just kind of, without thought, toss money." Another Manos por Dios trip leader had been traveling in Central America on religious volunteer trips with his now-grown sons for over a decade. He thought travel "made his sons different men, made them sensitive to what goes on in the world." His high-salaried older son was "much more free with using that money to help other people," and his younger son lived in Nicaragua for over a year, working for a non-profit organization.

Partners in Solidarity travelers expressed similar insights. Carrie from Fellowship UCC, who was discussed in Chapter Eight, spent one morning with a Nicaraguan nurse and heard person after person describe the symptoms caused by parasites in the town's supply of drinking water. Carrie told me, "I know I don't look at a bottle of water the same way. When I go grab a bottle of water, I don't think I ever think about that clean bottle of water the way I used to. That may sound ridiculous, but you know that's one small way" this trip impacted her thinking. Josh, a high school teacher mentioned in Chapter Six, told me that he started seeing ways he could do more with less. I asked, "Are there concrete ways you've sought to do that?" He replied, "No. I gotta confess I'm probably still stuck in the same material world I left. I've still got the same wants and needs and desires, and I'm buying the same clothes and driving the same truck and doing the same things I was doing. But maybe I'm just a little more aware of the fact that I could do with less. That is enough to make me consider."

There is remarkable consistency in the kinds of renewal or "recalibration" travelers shared. They told me that travel to an impoverished country prompted insights about how people value material goods. If travelers were "getting outside" of their habitus, their taken-for-granted cultures, they were doing so in a particular way that was linked to the structure of volunteer travel. Regardless of their personal motivations for going, volunteer tourists understood that their international trips involved giving time, energy, and material resources to people in need. Physical labor on specific projects such as building a house or school cafeteria drove home the point that their money and labor were being offered to people who lacked resources that travelers took for granted at home. The pervasive poverty they encountered was more visible and concentrated than the poverty in their own communities. It was the witness

of this poverty, or of the depth of Nicaraguans' religious faith despite this poverty, that prompted travelers to think afresh about their own materialism and their own faith. As a practice of deliberate distancing and reflection, volunteer travel is well positioned to illuminate specific assumptions about how people value their material resources and the ways those values foster or damage interpersonal relationships.

Beyond Change: Travel as Aligning Values and Actions

The act of "getting outside" one's habitus is only ever partial. The very habitus and social contexts that travelers felt they were unveiling determined the yardsticks that they used to measure their moral identities. In a few of the quotes above, travelers drew a line between shifts in attitude and changes in behavior. The idea that one's "real" values are displayed in one's actions rather than words resonates with a particular strain of teaching about the practice of Christian evangelism. A Biblical injunction to "spread the Gospel" has been interpreted in many ways throughout history. While one interpretation emphasizes teaching, preaching, and conversion, another stresses the embodiment of Christian values such as mercy, generosity, and piety. The latter approach was raised repeatedly in interviews. Several participants from both mainline and Evangelical Protestant traditions referenced Matthew 25, in which Jesus instructs people to feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and otherwise treat "the least of these" as any Christian would treat Jesus himself. A few people brought up a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel. If you must, use words." A majority of respondents attested that actions spoke louder than words. In line with this

assumption, their efforts to "see" themselves from a critical distance involved evaluating actions as more honest than words in communicating a moral identity.

People experiencing some greater awareness of how their values and day-to-day behaviors aligned may or may not describe that experience as a change. Thirty-something Manos por Dios traveler Gregory came to Nicaragua for the first time with his mother, brother, and several family friends. He had a hard time leaving behind his wife and ten-month-old daughter, but he felt the need to "give back" after experiencing a "huge miracle" when his daughter made it through a health crisis. Gregory told me his trip was "life changing" and "will forever affect the way I look at the world." Specifically, he noted a greater awareness of materialism and waste in the U.S. He remembered,

> Getting home, and this is gonna seem cliché and I'm sure you've heard this from every single person you've talked to, but the level of materialism and the consumption that exists here at home in America was just mind-blowing. Every time I went to a restaurant and ordered food and the packaging and just…. It reset my whole barometer for what do we really need to live and how much waste is there, and how many people are out there suffering that could benefit if we weren't so consumptive [*sic*]. If only there was a way we could share more of what we have here.

After identifying the problems of materialism and a desire to share more, he admitted that the changes in his life were more about gaining perspective than taking action. "More than anything," he mused, "I mainly take for granted less. Especially when I sit down to dinner in a nice house with good food and no worries about the normal necessities of life that I saw down in Nicaragua." Gregory also acknowledged that the intensity of these insights faded over time. He expressed this theory of the post-trip experience: "When you first get back you cherish everything, you don't take anything for granted for that first week or two. But two months after the trip, you're right back to where you started. Maybe with a little bit of attitude improvement because of some of

the thoughts and memories that you have. But it's so amazing how desensitized you get when you come back."

Gregory described his shift in perspective as "life changing" despite a lack of specific actions taken after travel. On the other hand, another Manos por Dios traveler disavowed her shifting perspective as change precisely because of a lack of action after her return home. As a young adult in the early 1980s, Jessica was a part of a socialist organization that worked on racism and union organizing activities. In the years since, marriage, motherhood, and employment had limited her time and interest in that kind of high stakes, high commitment activism. She told me her trip scratched an itch to "do more" than give money. For Jessica, travel unearthed a latent desire to identify as an activist. "It wasn't a big change that I experienced while there. It was kind of a deepening of an understanding of myself that I absolutely have to do this kind of work."

For the time being though, she was "still committed to being a mom and working person." She hoped to re-engage with activism "as those responsibilities leave." When that involvement might ramp up again was unclear. At one point, she mused that she'd like to retire early — in two or three years. At another, she suggested that a ten- to fifteen-year timeline might be more realistic. The urge to do more still pricked her, but other valued aspects of her identity, specifically motherhood and being a breadwinner for her family, kept her longings in abeyance.

The metaphors of renewal or of recalibration moved travelers a step away from concerns about change. After a few early interviews where the word "renewal" came up in people's description of their experiences, I began to use the word in questions, asking if travelers felt they had experienced any "change or perhaps renewal" in response to travel. For some, my use of the word "renewal" triggered the recognition that they had

not changed, while for others, renewal itself was a form of change. Ultimately, however, whether or not renewal was thought of as change was immaterial to the work that renewal appeared to be doing in the lives of the travelers. If they found inspiration in travel, it was not necessarily tied to changing behaviors; it was more likely grounded in a narrative about getting perspective on one's habits and routines and about *seeing* the unseen, taken-for-granted expectations that underpin day-to-day interactions, then thinking about the messages those habits revealed about values and priorities.

For travelers who saw congruence between their daily routines and the values they hoped to embody, travel renewed their comfort with their habits and routines. However, most travelers told me that they fell short in some way or another. For them, travel provided the distance necessary to see and interpret their actions and evaluate the impacts those actions had on others. These travelers' concerns mainly ran to questions about the kind of footprint their material wealth would leave on the world. They measured their generosity in part by efforts to use a smaller share of finite natural resources and in part by spending less of their money and time on self-gratifying pursuits in order to free up more of their first-world wealth and to mobilize energy to be used for the benefit of others.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The personal is powerful in volunteer tourism. For organizations hoping to combine volunteer tourism with sustainable development, personal connections between travelers and local residents are both the purpose of travel and a serious challenge. Personal connections generate financial and human resources for development programs that can address structural inequalities. Yet these same connections disrupt programs carefully calibrated to manage disparate power between donors and aid recipients and to mitigate disparate access among potential aid recipients.

Scholarship on volunteer tourism generally depicts cross-cultural intimacy as a desirable aspect of travel but one that is wholly separate from education about or interventions toward the structural inequalities that create poverty. Scholars further argue that ignoring structural inequalities inadvertently but inevitably perpetuates them.[1] The practices of religious international relief and development agencies suggest they too view intimacy as a tool to be managed and monitored in the interests of pursuing more systematic development goals.

This dissertation argues that rather than divorcing the desire for intimacy from the harms of inequality, the narratives, rhythms, and rituals of religious volunteer travel are constructed to balance the two. Organizations may fail at this juggling match more often than they succeed, but their efforts aim toward maximizing the positive effects of face-to-face contact while minimizing potential damage. The "episodic" and "embedded"

[1] McKinnon, "Orthodoxy of 'the Local'"; Hutnyk, *Rumour of Calcutta*.

orientations they use are carefully cultivated and flexible frameworks for directing attention to two divergent strategies for maintaining that balancing act. The episodic orientation bends toward emotionality, intuition, and individually tailored actions, the embedded toward controlled empathy, rumination, and community-centered action.

These results advance knowledge of a religious practice – religious volunteer travel among mainline and progressive Protestants – that has been overshadowed by attention to Evangelical Protestant international outreach. They also shed light on one way private U.S. citizens participate in international aid provision, detailing both the promise and pitfalls of personalizing such aid. In illuminating the ways that personalization powerfully influences the provision of aid, this research also offers an empirical counterpoint to social theories that argue that modernity has brought about an inevitable trend toward the depersonalization of social interactions. Finally, the dissertation identifies two flexible orienting frameworks that extend the theoretical tools researchers can apply to efforts to understand how people interact across durable social differences, particularly in the contexts of humanitarian aid and social service.

Two Orientations toward Encounters across Social Difference

In this dissertation, I present two orientations that shape encounters between religious volunteer tourists and local residents. The bundles of stories, rules, and rhythms that mark a specific orientation influence actions taken and cultural resources applied to a present encounter. Such influence is brought to bear by means of calling attention to a selective narrative of relevant past events or through the highlighting of a foreshortened or lengthened view of the future effects of encounters. When a religious

organization or any organization cultivates an episodic or embedded orientation toward its work, those orientations matter to social interactions in tangible ways.

Episodic Orientation

An episodic orientation encourages interactions that are intimate and focused on immediate concerns. It narrows attention toward the immediate past and future and the immediate surroundings: a home, a worksite, or a street corner, for example. In transnational aid encounters, this focus on immediate contexts directs travelers' attention away from concerns about cultural competency and national differences toward familiar cultural tools that they regularly use in houses, offices, or streets at home. The constricted focus of an episodic orientation actually increases travelers' authority to define situations on their own terms. They have access to a wide range of possibilities for defining a setting and applying cultural tools to interactions.

A focus on intimacy calls attention to the values, norms, or identities people think they share. Bonding over shared identities is more straightforward than developing relationships grounded in bridging social differences.[2] An episodic orientation creates the leeway necessary for people with vastly different expectations and life experiences to imagine themselves as having a shared understanding of their mutual experience. This flexibility eases social friction in the encounter but may lack traction for sustaining mutual understanding. Even among travelers from the same geographic region, two people may have the same physical experience and may approach it with a shared episodic orientation but come up with different meanings and

[2] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

different responses to the experience. For example, if two travelers speak with a teen girl about her aspirations, one might sense a parent-child connection, feeling a deep emotional bond and offering advice or financial support. The other traveler might experience a profound realization of his status as privileged person, perhaps for the first time fully appreciating how fortunate he is to have had educational and career opportunities that this girl was denied. Both personal responses to an interaction comply with the episodic orienting practices of Manos por Dios, but the reactions have very different material consequences for the Nicaraguan girl in question.

With the flexibility and variety of an episodic orientation come fragility and transience. Travelers and local residents may enter into an interaction with different expectations about their relationship, about which cultural tools will effectively communicate their intentions, or about how to evaluate an interaction's success. Misrecognition of intentions or goals means both parties may not leave an encounter satisfied. Moreover, even when a single encounter is satisfactory, it does not necessarily follow that travelers or hosts have unlocked a key or script that they can take with them to future interactions. The clear message of episodic orientations is that *each encounter* is special and set apart from the routines of daily life.

When the organization Manos por Dios put this episodic orientation into practice while facilitating religious volunteer tourism, it inspired tremendous generosity and impressive stories of personal transformation in both travelers and hosts. In Santa Inés, a man who used to scour the dump for recyclable metals became the owner of a bakery so popular that he employed neighboring women to bake and to sell the baked goods in the city a half hour away by taxi. Teenager Carolina from Santa Inés, Nicaragua, attended a private high school and dreamed of a different kind of future

with support from her parents and her sponsor Marge. Meanwhile, U.S. college student Stacey went from aspiring chef to aspiring diplomat and during our post-travel interview proudly described her plans to spend a semester abroad in the United Arab Emirates. Bert, a veteran who convinced a boy to return a stolen camera, became an advocate for Manos por Dios, giving fundraising presentations about their water sanitation programs to various churches and businesses in his community. The episodic approach to travel met people where they were, helping them to see unique opportunities for their own skills, interests, and talents to blossom and flourish in response to an extraordinary experience of transnational connection.

At the same time, this approach also created challenges for Manos por Dios communities. Travelers routinely took actions that disrupted the organization's efforts to distribute aid in systematic ways. On every trip, I witnessed people give or confess to giving cash gifts directly to individual Nicaraguans in need. In one particularly long and forthright interview with a resident of Santa Inés, I learned that these acts fostered jealousy in the community and distrust of some of the staff of Manos por Dios.

As I argued in Chapter Five, travelers were encouraged to trust their instincts about face-to-face interaction, and those instincts were strongly shaped by gender. When encouraged to use their judgment in evaluating how to act during face-to-face encounters, men tended to act quickly and independently, while women tended to talk over their options with staff or teammates. Gender also shaped the ways that travelers perceived children's vulnerability and potential. They saw energetic and entrepreneurial boys as vulnerable to the lure of illicit means of income and security, such as gangs, drugs, and theft, as well as the ill effects of a lack of positive male role models. They saw hardworking, compassionate girls as being at risk of being targeted

for sexual relationships by men and boys. The actions they took to aid boys and girls differed. To boys, they offered gifts, praise, and encouragement. They offered the same to girls along with frank advice about dating and education. In some cases, they also offered girls scholarships. As I explained in Chapter Five, Manos por Dios made efforts to distribute educational support fairly and systematically based on need and merit. However, girls but not boys received additional forms of emotional and material support above and beyond scholarship money. Such differences in treatment may have lasting consequences in communities where aid involves face-to-face contact with donors, particularly when donors adopt an episodic orientation to transnational encounters.

Travelers exposed to either an episodic or an embedded orientation expressed a range of claims about the impact of travel on their lives. These included travel inspiring dramatic changes to career goals, family formation, and spiritual life; travel being one of several ways they expressed their moral identity as good Christians; and travel as a way to get outside their daily routines and renew or recalibrate their commitments to greater spirituality or decreased materialism. However, participants of Manos por Dios trips who were encouraged to develop personally reflective styles of communication tended to speak of the impacts of travel in terms as highly individualized.

As Chapter Eight's description of West Church illustrated, Manos por Dios travelers each crafted a personal narrative of the impact of travel. Though the team's leaders suggested that the travelers adopt a collective goal to minister to the staff at Manos por Dios, post-travel narratives reflected that travelers followed divergent paths. Jeff sponsored a Manos por Dios employee, and Linda paid for a jungle gym. Sam and Mike decided not to travel again, and Kathy was ambivalent about both travel and the

organization itself. As Manos por Dios coordinator Jen had encouraged, the team members spoke of the ways God had called each of them to specific tasks or insights post-travel. At West Church, none of the specific post-trip activities that travelers identified helped connect trip experiences to the domestic volunteer work travelers did or political commitments they held. A few Manos por Dios travelers did mention the ways that travel encouraged them to act or think differently in their own communities; these were the exceptions rather than the rule. Despite having conversations in Nicaragua about how to tackle poverty at home, West Church and the other teams that traveled with Manos por Dios were more likely to use reflection time as a tool for contrasting poverty at home and abroad, often attributing the causes of poverty in Nicaragua to corrupt or incompetent governance while identifying personal failings such as laziness or apathy as the cause of poverty in the U.S. These contrasts did little to encourage episodically oriented religious volunteers to think that their poverty alleviation efforts during international travel might teach them something about how to pursue or improve their rich and diverse social outreach activities in the U.S.

Embedded Orientation

In contrast to the episodic approach, an embedded orientation encourages thinking about the continuity between a specific historical trajectory, the present interaction, and the potential long-term consequences of that interaction. An embedded orientation sets stronger constraints on the definition of an interaction setting and on the range of cultural tools that might be applied in that setting. The authority to discern the right course of action and to take it is grounded in cultural fluency and specific

historical knowledge rather than individual life experience or intimate knowledge of another person. The practice of social reflexivity influences interactions insofar as it encourages talk that sets definitions of roles and expectations for behavior.

At the same time, this talk centers attention on differences between travelers and hosts. A focus on difference is reinforced by stories and orienting practices that delineate distinct relational roles for cross-national interaction partners. Working from an embedded orientation may set interlocutors up for a greater proportion of failed interactions in the short-run. Travelers may second-guess their words or actions because they are worried they would say something culturally inappropriate or patronizing. When every small gesture, such as sharing a photograph with a child, can be held up as an example of relationship building, then other small gestures, such as giving a away a pair of sunglasses, can also potentially damage the power dynamics of those budding relationships. The need to take into account more social contexts, such as a particular historical trajectory or awareness of cultural differences, limits the usefulness of cultural repertoires that people possess prior to travel. Adding new tools such as rules, habits, rhythms, and narratives is one way to respond to this challenge, but it is an awkward and time-consuming process. Those who do not "buy in" to the particular vision of an embedded organizational approach such as the one employed by Partners in Solidarity may see the value of embedded perspectives, but disagree with organizational staff about which particular contexts matter.

On the other hand, when both parties in an interaction pay attention to shared histories and cultural differences, they are more likely to be on the same page when it comes to defining a situation. Taking into account more contexts, such as historical precedents, cultural norms, gender expectations, and even international political

economies, results in a greater likelihood that two people in an interaction will share expectations about roles, communicate intentions effectively, and have interactional success. Successful interactions embedded in a shared trajectory may have more powerful and cumulative effects, even if they are harder to achieve.

In Chapter Six, I followed United Church's foray into partnership with a community called Aldeas Cafés. One girl in the community, Jessica, stirred anxiety and protective instincts in travelers much like the girls in Santa Inés stirred similar concerns for Manos por Dios travelers. Since Partners in Solidarity travelers embraced an embedded orientation toward travel, the team's actions toward Jessica and her community took a very different form than did Marj's actions on Carolina's behalf. Team members looked for a course of action that would not only benefit Jessica personally but would also address a related community-wide problem: the lack of a local high school. The decision to establish a high school rather than a scholarship program emerged from a thoughtful consideration of the successes and flaws of past Partners in Solidarity projects as well as a long-term vision of the future. They considered their five-year covenanted partnership with Aldeas Cafés and asked themselves, which types of actions would help more people and still be achievable in the given time frame. Which program would be sustainable in the community? The group successfully channeled their affection for one girl into a carefully considered and ambitious plan to support a high school.

On the other hand, Partners in Solidarity travelers could not bring themselves to take the long view when Jessica appeared to be the victim of human trafficking. Their interventions returned Jessica home but compromised their view of themselves as non-paternalistic and mutual partners of the Aldeas Cafés community. They had asserted

their power and authority in a way that circumvented the community leadership structures and showed open favoritism to one girl and her family. The embedded orientation to interactions could not prevent travelers or the organizational staff from acting on their instincts, but it did offer them tools to process these actions. Through social reflexivity, the team from United Church and other Partners in Solidarity teams who witnessed the crisis helped restore an identity centered on non-paternal partnerships. They constructed ways to frame the crisis as an opportunity to direct future attention to new community-wide programs, including a women's microloan bank, and to frank discussions between international partners about unemployment and human trafficking in Aldeas Cafés and Nicaragua more generally.

In Chapters Eight and Nine, I discussed how this embedded approach to international travel shaped the assessments that travelers made about the influence travel had on their lives. I argued that this practice of social reflexivity powerfully shaped team efforts to craft collective identities for their congregations. At Fellowship UCC, travelers took specific steps to include non-traveling congregation members in that identity as partners to the village of Sacuanjoche. These steps included displaying labeled photos of village residents in the church, filming short videos for both partner communities, blogging and Skyping during the trip, bringing Nicaraguan community leaders to the U.S., and sharing stories about Sacuanjoche with the wider congregation through worship services, newsletters, and fundraisers. Partners in Solidarity travelers from all the teams described to me ways they were personally committed to their Nicaraguan partner communities, from financial donations to letters written to hosting Nicaraguan visitors in their homes. They also described ways they worked to get fellow congregants to "buy in" to the vision of partnership they learned in the field. However,

as with the Manos por Dios travelers, I rarely heard Partners in Solidarity travelers link their relationship to Sacuanjoche or Aldeas Cafés or Comarco Este to the many other ways these travelers were involved in volunteering, social service provision, or social justice advocacy in their hometowns.

On the Importance of Timing

Historian Paul Ricoeur argues that a person who remembers only a small amount of the past will necessarily have a foreshortened view of future possibilities and that this person will seek out the familiar.[3] In contrast, people who expand their experiences by seeking new knowledge of their own past or of the life experiences of others will have a broader orientation from which to engage and interpret social interactions. These claims resonate with the motivations of religious volunteer travelers. Many travelers I spoke with shared their beliefs that travel broadens their worldviews and that an expansive worldview makes for a better person. It equips people to be global citizens,[4] expands cultural repertoires,[5] and enables people to recognize and act on the needs of others.[6]

On some level, any adult who volunteers for international service travel is attuned to cultural differences and desires to learn more about the world. Within that general perspective, however, some travelers – the ones who adopt an episodic view of

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[3] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.
[4] One Manos por Dios traveler said "it turns 'we' and 'them' into an 'us'."
[5] One man told me that stepping outside a comfort zone makes for a more complete person. He gave the examples of regional differences in cuisine and urban/suburban differences in access to education as two examples of why it is important to expand one's knowledge of other cultures.
[6] A woman on a Manos por Dios trip said learning about another culture "helps us to understand them better and maybe makes us better able to assist them in some ways."

travel – learn to pair an understanding of travel as time set apart with an interest in cross-cultural interactions that emphasizes idiosyncrasies and similarities between travelers and hosts. In these cases, time seems to work the way Ricoeur describes. A focus on the present and the immediate past leads to a foreshortened view of the future and an emphasis on what is familiar in cross-cultural interaction. Other travelers learn to embed their experience in a historical trajectory of sustained interactions and to focus on the cultural specificity of this history in such a way as to emphasize difference and disjuncture between cross-cultural partners. Insofar as this embedded trajectory evokes visions of a long-term future, Ricoeur's assertions about experience and expectation hold. Broad discussions of long-term impacts encourage people to think in terms of big structures, power imbalances, and social rather than personal transformations. According to development experts and scholars of volunteer tourism, this kind of thinking is precisely what is needed if volunteer tourism is ever to contribute to sustainable forms of international development.

However, travelers using an embedded orientation sometimes seem hamstrung by anxieties about harm done in the past and their poor ability to judge the collateral damage their actions may cause in the future. Rather than an expansive turning outward toward greater and more transformative expectations for the future, embedding one's orientation in attention to history may make travelers hyperaware of their *lack* of knowledge, potentially immobilized, thereby restricting future action.

Beyond Orientations: Nicaraguan Responses

Finally, as I have argued in Chapters Four and Seven, Nicaraguans are also exposed to episodic and embedded orientations to travel. However, that exposure is often partial or sporadic. This is especially true of the children whom travelers lavish with affection and the adult beneficiaries of aid who are not affiliated with the local leadership circles where contact with facilitating organizations is greatest. These Nicaraguans employ their own cultural models and strategies to aid interactions.

Children befriended travelers, begged for essentials and non-essentials, and conducted themselves as amateur entrepreneurs. Assertive boys and ambitious girls demonstrated their worthiness to receive aid through their potential to become strong family heads and community leaders. Travelers responded to these children in ways guided by their orientations to interaction, either through the episodic approach of gifts and sponsorships or through the embedded approach of using individual children as symbolic catalysts for educational and social reforms in communities.

Adults used familiar models of reciprocity to engage traveling guests. Where these models collided with orientation of travelers was in the performance of personal agency. Patron-client models for framing gifts of aid downplayed the personal agency of Nicaraguans. Despite evidence that Nicaraguans played active roles in seeking out and securing aid, those who used patron-client language attributed all the initiative and credit for an aid encounter to foreign donors. These stories also lacked language to explain how Nicaraguans might reciprocate with gifts for travelers. However, religious models of aid positioned prayer as a powerful act, capable of both initiating aid encounters and providing the reciprocity needed to maintain aid-driven relationships

with foreign visitors. Prayer became a way to ask for what was needed, to secure the cooperation of foreign religious donors, and to offer a supernaturally valuable gift in return for the materially valuable gifts that Nicaraguans received.

Prayer was a powerful source of connection, but the religious models of aid that Nicaraguans deployed also included problematic ontological claims about a divinely ordained hierarchy of development and moral worth between powerful and generous U.S. visitors and worthy but lesser Nicaraguan recipients. While travelers viewed assertive personal agency as a signal of increasing empowerment and development, they viewed effusive praise and humility as a sign of increasing dependency on foreign aid. Ironically, the same religious model of aid encounters that allowed Nicaraguans to assert their agency as individuals capable of providing a mutual exchange also may have encouraged these aid recipients to view their communities or Nicaragua as a whole as fundamentally dependent on or inferior to the U.S. and its religious volunteers.

Practical Considerations

I have had many conversations with pastors, students, acquaintances, and family members about the practical implications of my research. Whether these people supported or disliked religious volunteer tourism, they all believed it would remain a popular practice for the foreseeable future. Given the many ways cross-national encounters can go *wrong,* they asked, how could we do these trips in the right ways?

If nothing else, it is clear to me after two years of fieldwork that what people mean by the "right" way to travel differs wildly. It is not my desire or my place to set a flag in the sand for any one philosophy of travel. Both organizations I traveled with

offered examples of the promise and the pitfalls of their respective approaches. I can say with confidence that certain practices I witnessed led fairly consistently to certain outcomes. Organizations with episodic orientations will likely struggle with "rogue donors" whose bending of rules may encourage begging, under-the-table giving, and jealousy and resentment within receiving communities. At the same time, they will likely continue to inspire dramatic acts of generosity and loyalty to both the organization and to particular programs or people. Organizations with embedded orientations may inspire travelers to embrace their philosophy, but those travelers are also likely to struggle with and second-guess their efforts to interact with aid partners in culturally appropriate and non-paternalistic ways. At the same time, these organizations also equip travelers and hosts with the narrative tools and attentiveness to context that will help them recover from and repair missteps or even major violations of their ethos to transform communities, not individuals.

Accordingly, I offer would-be trip leaders seven practical pieces of advice based on my observations in Nicaragua.

Know your narrative. Part of the reason both Manos por Dios and Partners in Solidarity are so successful is because they each have a clear and consistent message about the purposes of travel and of cross-national interactions. Those messages are communicated early and often, and they encompass goals aimed at both the traveling congregations and the local Nicaraguan communities.

Connect with long-term programming. If contributing to sustainable or long-term community transformations is the goal, then connection to a program with a year-round presence on the ground is crucial. At Partners in Solidarity, local Nicaraguan non-profits and two Nicaraguan staff provide technical assistance and facilitate

communication between international partners. At Manos por Dios, travelers contribute to the ongoing work of long-term missionaries.

Practice social reflexivity. To create and maintain social ties that bridge differences, it is important for groups to talk about those ties: how they are formed, what they mean, and how they can be maintained. Daily reflection is usually part of the mission trip experience. Talking only about one's personal walk with God tends to make personal transformation the focus of travel. Collectively reflecting as a team about cross-cultural interactions leads to discussion and to the building of cross-cultural relationships. As Chapter Six illustrated, this practice also helps travelers respond to unexpected crises effectively, recover from mistakes, and restore cross-national relationships that have been damaged.

Educate travelers about the project or location. One criticism of short-term mission trips is that travelers come home excited about the adventure of travel rather than committed to a particular community or organization. Specific educational opportunities help redirect that enthusiasm. Manos por Dios excels at teaching travelers about their mission and programs and is highly successful at recruiting repeat travelers and long-term donors who are dedicated to the organization. Partners in Solidarity spends significant time educating travelers about the history, political climate, and development needs of partner communities and of Nicaragua as a whole. As a result, travelers feel a connection and loyalty to those communities.

Publicly recognize the gifts and contributions of hosts. Many Nicaraguans I interviewed had difficulty naming gifts or resources that they could offer U.S. travelers, despite the many times I saw Nicaraguans offering and providing resources. Similarly, U.S. travelers often rejected Nicaraguans' intentional gifts while telling stories about the

many insights they had taken away from their interactions with local people. However, shared religious rituals where Nicaraguans and travelers prayed for one another were an important exception to this trend. Organizations that facilitate travel can foster cross-national bonds by creating space for such shared rituals, particularly ones in which travelers name and express gratitude for the gifts they have received. Such rituals can enhance solidarity and encourage public declarations of commitments for the future. In host countries such as Nicaragua where formal rituals are a common part of culture, ceremonies such as house blessings create space for hosts to offer gifts of prayer, make promises to complete the work U.S. travelers began, and otherwise publicly identify their contributions to a cross-national relationship with U.S. travelers.

Make the link between global and local. Travelers make sense out of new experiences by making comparisons to the familiar. To make sense out of international poverty, travelers made problematic statements about U.S. poverty that sometimes perpetuated racist stereotypes. Neither group's reflective talk played a role in helping travelers link their experiences in Nicaragua to other forms of volunteering or advocacy they might pursue at home. For groups hoping that trips will inspire such activity, especially advocacy or social justice activism, it may be important to deliberately discuss and analyze the comparisons people are making between their experiences in the field and their experiences at home. Linking these discussions to action steps may be a concrete way to extend the lessons of the field to the local settings of travelers.

Name concrete post-travel goals and follow through. Practitioners and academics agree that a major failing in the practice of religious volunteer travel and short-term mission trips is post-travel follow through. For teams hoping to engage their congregations in ongoing ministry, identifying the next logical steps while still in the

field is a valuable motivational tactic. I observed that such conversations helped to energize specific action steps in the 3-6 months following travel, including such activities as leading worship, contributing to the church newsletter, and planning fundraisers. In interviews, travelers cited changes in both their attitudes and behaviors but sometimes struggled to articulate specific actions taken. Of those changes that were reported, almost all involved direct support of the ongoing work of Manos por Dios or Partners in Solidarity through actions such as fundraising for a water project, spearheading an internship program for doctors in Nicaragua, or buying fair trade coffee after spending time at a coffee plantation. By discussing these goals together before leaving the field, teams may lay a stronger groundwork for extending narratives of travel into narratives about travel's long-term impacts.

Advancing Research

This research contributes to academic debates on bridging cultural differences, on the relationship between humanitarianism and international development, on alienation and depersonalization in modern life, and on the formation of transnational solidarity. It advances empirical understanding of two related and understudied phenomena: the personalization of international aid that has accompanied its privatization and the religious practice of international short-term travel of non-Evangelical Christians from the U.S. This popular social phenomenon engages millions of participants and billions of dollars each year from the U.S. alone, yet it is poorly understood outside of the field of participants.

This dissertation also affirms the need for scholarship examining the relationships among religion, humanitarianism, and international development. Until recently, religion and spirituality were largely taboo subjects for scholars of development.[7] While that attitude has shifted, the bulk of research on religion and development treats religious traditions and practices as variables in studies driven by theories about poverty and development. My research highlights the need for research that takes religion scholarship seriously as a source for theoretical underpinnings that can inform studies of poverty and development. It does so in two ways. First, I identify prayer as a powerful local practice for asserting personal agency. While prayer enhances expressions of agency at the individual level, the ontological claims that motivate these assertive statements conflict fundamentally with secular theories about how empowerment and participation are supposed to transform developing countries. Second, my study of the particular practice of religious volunteer tourism highlights continuities between humanitarian and development goals. As does sociologist Erica Bornstein who studied humanitarianism in India, I find that religious actors blend their humanitarian impulses and their commitment to sustainable development.

International travel is not the only setting where people debate tensions between a personal, case-by-case approach to social problems and an approach that tackles social systems at the expense of some individuals. The episodic and embedded orientations presented in this research are perspectives that can and should be examined in other settings as well. One obvious extension of these flexible and contrasting orientations would be an examination of wide-scale secular programs such

[7] Ver Beek, "Spirituality: a Development Taboo."

as the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and Teach for America. In these programs, young adults receive extensive training before placement in one- to two-year jobs, typically in underdeveloped communities or underperforming schools. These programs involve cross-cultural contact and temporary immersion in an organizational culture, and they are designed to both inspire young adult workers and transform local communities. Since these institutions are large and well-established, a large body of alumni exists, as does a variety of communities and schools that could serve as case studies for examining the short-, mid- and long-term consequences of exposure to institutional practices. Such data would make it possible to track over time the effects of the narratives and rhythms of episodic and embedded approaches to cross-cultural social service provision.

Finally and centrally, this dissertation dispels myths about a religious practice that even many participants dismiss as paternalistic, selfish, and potentially harmful. Religious volunteer travel can be all these things. Face-to-face contact facilitates the transmission of material and cultural goods, including the kinds of dominant hegemonic ideas criticized by postcolonial scholars. Yet as Anna Tsing argues, contact also has the potential to rupture these hegemonies. Ideas, values, and materials flow in multiple directions. Travelers are not unaware of the potential harm they may do. Their interactions with locals are steeped in moral tensions that both parties must navigate: Are we the same or different? Do these encounters help or harm? Will travelers exert privilege and power or will hosts achieve mutuality? This dissertation documents how both travelers and hosts navigate those tensions and how they revise and renew moral identities through encounters of mutual transnational care.

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