Mission of Hope aids Nicaragua, places in need

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Contribution writer

What began as a project to raise money for hurricane victims in Nicaragua has become a mission that helps people in that country, as well as across the United States and around the world.

More than 20 years since two students planted the seed that became North Country Mission of Hope, the nonprofit organization now feeds more than 6,700 children a day in 24 economically disadvantaged schools in Nicaragua, amounting to 1 million meals served each year.

Also in Nicaragua, Mission of Hope educates 800 children every year, sponsors four orphanages, operates two clinics that focus on women’s health and abuse victims as well as general health care, and operates a dental clinic. It currently works with other groups to provide eye care but will soon offer eye care on its own.

For Sister Debbie Blow, co-founder of Mission of Hope and its executive director from the start, the purpose of Mission of Hope is, in the words of a call from Pope Francis, “to be the spark of God’s divine light in our world,” she said.

“I believe that’s what the mission tries to do. We try to be the spark of divine light in our world,” Sister Debbie, a Dominican Sister of Hope, said. “We are called to bring hope, to be that source, to be that hope bearer. I’m called to be a woman of hope in the midst of all of this awful stuff going on in our own country as well as other countries.”

Planting a seed

Mission of Hope started in 1998 after Hurricane Mitch, which struck Nicaragua and other Central American countries. It was the deadliest hurricane to hit that region.

When the hurricane hit, Sister Debbie worked at Seton Catholic Central High School as the campus minister and Scripture teacher. Two of the students there were from Nicaragua.

The children—a boy and a girl—had arrived in America and in Plattsburgh with their family as refugees of the Nicaraguan civil war in the mid-1980s. When Hurricane Mitch destroyed their native country, they were high schoolers in Sister Debbie’s program. The students reached out to her to help the people of Nicaragua.

“They kept saying, ‘Well, Sister, are we going to do something?’” Sister Debbie said. “And the answer was, ‘Yes, let’s figure out what we’re going to do.’”

Together, they began soliciting donations from staff, students and parents of the school. Sister Debbie told the students they could put a plea out on the local public radio station to match whatever they collected.

“We collected $3,000 in a week,” Sister Debbie said, noting she then went to WIRY to make good on her promise. “A week after that, we had $30,000.”

With that money, Sister Debbie organized a trip with a group of youth and adults to Nicaragua shortly after the hurricane.

During that trip, on the way back from serving at an impoverished orphanage, Sister Debbie said she was sitting next to a boy who people told her not to take on the journey because he could be trouble. But that’s exactly why she chose to take him; she said she thought he needed a wakeup call.

The boy asked her, “Sister, do you know what the greatest sin would be?”

Sister Debbie said her thoughts turned to being in a foreign territory, her dislike of flying, her fear of spiders, snakes and insects, and being without electricity. As they traveled down a mountain from the orphanage, she really didn’t want “a theological conversation about sin,” she said. Still, she answered the boy, “No, what would the greatest sin be?”

“He turned to me with tears in his eyes, and he said, ‘If we never came back,’” Sister Debbie said.

At that moment, she said, she knew the trip could not be a one-and-done situation, a group of Americans donating their money to make themselves feel better but never doing anything else.

In February 1999, Sister Debbie organized a larger team of 60 people. Since then, there have been 71 trips to Nicaragua with 1,900 participants.

Watching it grow

Shortly after that first trip, Mission of Hope became its own nonprofit corporation in the United States and a nongovernmental organization in Nicaragua. Since the beginning, it has had four main pillars—education, health care, community development and ecological sustainability—with all of its programs and projects falling under one of those pillars.

While Nicaragua has been the primary area of service for the last 20 years, Sister Debbie noted the focus has expanded. Mission of Hope responded to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and has also served in El Paso, Texas, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, the Philippines, Guatemala and Venezuela.

“If we can establish a vetted source and a trusted source on the ground of an emergency disaster, then we will do what we can,” she said. “Our shipments have expanded as well as our financial support.”

Mission of Hope is based in Plattsburgh with only Sister Debbie and a part-time office assistant as paid staff, but the organization has a strong and steady contingent of volunteers who work at the warehouse every Wednesday or whenever they are needed. They pack medical equipment, sort clothing, collect school supplies and distribute those items to wherever the need is greatest—including the local area.

“We’ve always assisted locals who needed something that we might’ve had in the warehouse,” Sister Debbie said, noting that could be someone who needs a hospital bed or a wheelchair, or a domestic violence survivor who needs help.

Those items are also shipped to Nicaragua and all around the world, but one thing Mission of Hope doesn’t ship is the food it serves to the children it feeds in Nicaragua. Instead, the organization sponsors 10 Nicaraguan farmers and supplies them with the seeds, resources, and equipment to produce the rice that goes into the 1 million yearly meals.

Partnering with another NGO, Mission of Hope also provides soy, vegetables, and other nutrients to go with the rice. The organization’s Nicaraguan employees on the ground

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8
Mission of Hope

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

then distribute the meals to the 24 schools.

Mission of Hope also relies on its Nicaraguan workforce to plan and oversee the construction of homes in the country – 10 at a time, sponsored by people local to the North Country, including many from the Diocese of Ogdensburg. The employees screen and select those who will receive homes, and then the prospective homeowners build their own homes as well as one another’s.

Empowering people

The four pillars of Mission of Hope are education – accomplished through its nutrition and education programs; health care – medical, dental, and eye clinics; community development – renovating schools and hospitals and building homes; and ecological sustainability, sponsoring farmers and providing energy-efficient stoves, water filters and tank systems, as well as moringa trees that offer a source of nutrition and water purification.

There may be a fifth pillar – empowerment. Sister Debbie said Mission of Hope purposely has no American employees permanently in Nicaragua. Other than mission trip participants, all of the work is done by Nicaraguans themselves.

“From the beginning, we always emphasize that we wanted to empower, not control,” Sister Debbie said. “We have our Nicaraguan employees continuing the dream of sharing hope and believing in its power and believing in the power of being in communion and using their gifts and talents.”

And that is paying off, she said, at a time when Mission of Hope is unable to send mission teams to Nicaragua because of sociopolitical uprisings and issues with the government.

“While we can’t travel there, none of our programs or projects have been interrupted,” Sister Debbie said. “We’re not able to send anyone on mission, but that doesn’t mean our programs have stopped.”

Though Mission of Hope works to meet the physical needs of the people in Nicaragua, it is often the Nicaraguan people who meet the spiritual needs of those who come to help them. “For the majority of people in Nicaragua, they are the ones that help us to grow in our faith more deeply,” Sister Debbie said, noting the country is about 93 percent Christian. “They are the ones that present the realities of what darkness in our world is today and how we can see light despite the darkness.”

Recalling “one example of many stories,” Sister Debbie said she went to Nicaragua one time in early December to help distribute several tractor-trailer loads of equipment that had been shipped from Plattsburgh. She joined a procession celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Celebrants go from home to home – with a statue of the Virgin Mary and a light – to sing for the homeowners, who in turn present gifts. That is generous and humbling in itself since the typical home is “a two-room tin shack,” Sister Debbie said.

On this occasion, Sister Debbie walked with a woman named Magaly during the procession. With no streetlights and most homes having no power, Sister Debbie wondered to Magaly how people see.

“Her response was, ‘You must learn to see God in the darkness,’ ” Sister Debbie said. “That is one example of their depth of faith, and I could go on and on and on. Their faith is important because, honestly, they have their faith, they have their family, they have their communion, their fellowship with one another, their friends. That’s really the heart of their lives. ... The Nicaraguan people restore hope and help healing in our own travelers, and I have seen that time and time and time again.”

Giving blessings

The mission of Mission of Hope, Sister Debbie said, involves not just showing care and concern for the poor and the marginalized but also providing the opportunity for people who have been blessed by a life in America to show their gratitude and help others by giving from their blessings.

“Service is something we all need to be about and to be aware of how blessed we are,” she said. “It’s always about helping us to be grateful. From our gratitude, we will share our blessings. It ultimately allows us to connect more deeply with the rest of the human community and to use our skills and blessings and gifts to foster empowerment.”

For Sister Debbie, the mission also involves giving hope – not just to those in Nicaragua who are being helped but also to those from America who are helping them.

“There is a transforming power to hope. When you are in connection and in communication and in relationship with your Creator, with your community, the world community, and with all of creation itself, then you can see the transforming power unfold,” she said. “I really believe that that’s how I’m called to preach the Gospel to our world. We hear, ‘feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned,’ and the list goes on and on. That’s how I see in my own life being called to live as a Dominican Sister of Hope, but also to be in communion with all of the world community and with creation. Hope takes over. Hope transforms us.”

Hope takes over and transforms, Sister Debbie said, when people consider how they can be the spark of God’s divine light in the world and decide to answer His call to help the poor and marginalized.

“The challenge is, will we? Will we hear the call of the Gospel? Will we hear the cry of the poor? We know God hears the cry of the poor. The challenge is, will we?” she said. “We (Mission of Hope) are engaged where we can be, when we can be, how we can be. We hear the cry of the poor, and every person needs to hear that.”

One doesn’t need to travel to Nicaragua and anywhere else to answer God’s call; the mission field begins in one’s own community.

“Missionary service is something we all need to live,” Sister Debbie said. “Mission service is a way of living. It’s a heart movement, and every Catholic Christian is called to be a missionary in that reality. It’s all about saying what we can, where we can, when we can.”
Pope: Christian battle is against evil, not people

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — When Catholics attack other members of the church, they are hurting Christ, Pope Francis said.

"Even those who are ideologists, because they want the 'purity' of the church, strike at Christ," he said during his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square Oct. 9.

Taking a break from the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon, the pope led the audience and continued his series of talks on the Acts of the Apostles.

He focused on the persecution of the church after St. Stephen's martyrdom, and on St. Paul's transformation from being known as Saul and a persecutor to being Paul, a disciple of Christ and courageous preacher of the Gospel.

Saul wanted to destroy the church and he would hunt down Christians to be imprisoned.

Pope Francis said those people at the audience who have experienced or whose communities have experienced "persecution by dictators understand well what it means to 'hunt people down,' and that is what Saul did."

Saul thought he was serving God's law, the pope said, and he saw Christianity as a doctrinal divergence from Judaism. But inside of Saul, with his "murderous threats," there "blew a breeze that smelled of death, not life," the pope said.

Saul is depicted as someone who shows great intolerance toward those who think differently from him and who reduces them to potential enemies to crush, he said.

Saul, he said, turns religion into "a religious ideology, a social ideology and a political ideology." It is only with his conversion on the road to Damascus, when Christ touches his heart, that Saul, blinded and helpless, becomes Paul and is reborn through baptism.

"Only after he has been transformed by Christ will he teach that the true struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the powers of darkness against the evil spirits," Pope Francis said.

Paul, he said, teaches "that you mustn't fight people, but fight the evil that inspires their actions."