

# RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



The Institute  
on Religion &  
Democracy

January 1988

## On the Peace Watch: IRD Visits Churches in Central America

These are crucial days for the peoples and churches of Central America. On January 15 the five Central American presidents will meet to review compliance with the accords they signed in Guatemala last August. It remains uncertain whether that meeting will be able to hail decisive steps toward democracy, reconciliation, and non-intervention -- or whether it will mark a dead end for the peace process.

Central American churches have a large stake in the outcome. Several church leaders have taken personal risks in trying to mediate national reconciliation. And, ultimately, the work of the Church in that region will be greatly affected by whether its peoples live in peace or at war, under democracy or under dictatorship.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy has been involved in three recent trips to that volatile region. On October 9-14 IRD Executive Director Kent Hill and Research Director Alan Wisdom visited Nicaragua. Mr. Wisdom went back to Nicaragua November 8-11, accompanying a Central America Peace and Democracy Watch delegation from Ohio. And from November 29 to December 6 IRD sponsored

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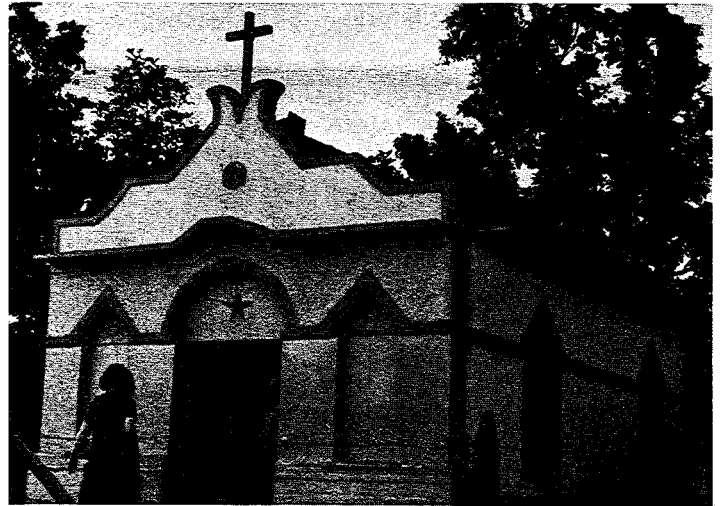


Photo by Kent Hill

*An IRD-sponsored delegation visits a church in rural Nicaragua. The IRD will be publishing a fuller report on our November 29 - December 6 trip to Nicaragua, El Salvador and Costa Rica, including an analysis of religious freedom and church-state relations during the peace process. You may obtain the report for \$2.00 (\$1.80 for IRD members) by writing the IRD.*

## The Winds of Change. . . Big Chill for Soviet Believers?

Mikhail Gorbachev has come and gone. For some Americans, opinions of the Soviet leader have changed. A mere handshake provoked one chilling comment: "It was like the coming of the second Messiah" (Time, 12/21/87). But for many others, the summit intensified the lobbying efforts and public demonstrations of those opposed to the human rights policies of the Soviet government. (The most notable was the massive demonstration on behalf of Soviet Jewry which attracted 200,000 to Washington, DC, on Dec. 6.) Several congressional leaders also expressed caution with regard to this new era of glasnost.

"Clearly winds of change are blowing across the Soviet Union. But only time will tell whether they are the cold winds of the Siberian north or the warming winds of freedom and human rights," stated

Rep. Paul Henry (R-MI) at the opening of a December 7 press conference on Capitol Hill which highlighted two new congressional initiatives for religious freedom.

The news conference was jointly sponsored by the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (a bipartisan congressional effort to call attention to global persecution) and the Coalition for Solidarity with Christians in the USSR, which is chaired by IRD's Executive Director, Kent R. Hill. Rep. Henry introduced a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, signed by 258 members of the House of Representatives, which called on the General Secretary to initiate changes, in both Soviet law and practice, to end religious discrimination. The letter, which was delivered to the Soviet Embassy in Washington on December 4, welcomed the "promise of glasnost" while identifying 17 types of religious oppression and repression which

(Big Chill, cont'd on page 2)

# From the Director's Desk

Beginning with this issue of *Religion and Democracy*, we are shifting to a monthly publication schedule. This will allow us to serve you in a more timely and effective manner. Without sacrificing our commitment to careful research, we believe you will find the new format livelier, more concise, and less likely to disappear into your "to read" file.

We will supplement our newsletter with more frequent publication of "Briefing Papers." These interviews, transcripts of press conferences, or IRD-researched and written articles will continue to provide the more in-depth analyses of the critical issues facing us both as citizens and concerned church members.

The IRD is also involved in a transition to a new membership computerized sort system, which will enable us to respond to you more quickly and efficiently. If there are any errors on your present mailing label, or if you are receiving duplicate mailings, would you please send us the labels in question with an indication of what the problem is?

We will also be glad to add to our mailing list those who you believe would find our materials useful. Please send us the names and addresses of friends, fellow church members, or colleagues. You will not only be providing them with helpful resources, but you will be helping the IRD to expand its membership and support base. Thanks so much for your help!

— Kent R. Hill

(Big Chill, cont'd from page 1)

persist under Gorbachev. Among these 17 violations are the "forced closing of religious institutions," "the incarceration of individuals in mental and psychiatric institutions for practices of religious belief," and "prohibitions against the general religious education of minors."

Rep. Chris Smith (R-IL) presented a resolution which he introduced to Congress the day following the press conference. This resolution, co-sponsored by 79 members of the House, calls for the Soviet Union to comply with universal human rights standards as embodied in the Helsinki Accords, "for the release and amnesty for all Christian prisoners, for churches and seminaries to be reopened, and for widespread distribution of religious materials. An updated list of 171 Christians who were known to be imprisoned for their religious convictions was pro-

vided by the Coalition (supported by research from Keston College, England). The number of known prisoners of all faiths is still over 200.

"It is true that there have been well-publicized individual releases of religious dissidents in the Soviet Union in the recent months," acknowledged Rep. Henry, "but the fact remains that roughly one-third of all religious and political dissidents imprisoned in the Soviet Union today have been sent to the jails, the prisons, the labor camps and psychiatric institutions since Secretary Gorbachev came to power."

Dr. Kent Hill concurred: "The best way to test the depth of glasnost is not to count the number of cases resolved, but rather to ask whether the legal and constitutional discrimination against believers has been abolished. The answer is that structural and institutional persecution against believers remains firmly in place under Mr. Gorbachev."

Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), who himself is Jewish, further called for a general amnesty for all Christian prisoners: "What is called for is the recognition by the Soviets (of the right) of all Christians to practice their faith in their churches and in their homes."

The release of Baptist Anna Chertkova from a 14-year confinement in a psychiatric hospital was noted by Rep. John Porter (R-IL), co-chairman of the Human Rights Caucus. The Rev. Dr. Dick Rodgers, an Anglican priest whose organization, Vigil for Anna, had worked many months for her release, gave an update on Chertkova's status. (She has not yet been allowed to leave the USSR.) Dr. Rodgers issued a challenge to the U.S. churches; he is searching for U.S. Christians who are willing to stand up for their persecuted brothers and sisters and lobby their lawmakers and administrators on the prisoners' behalf. He also announced that his

(Big Chill, cont'd on page 3)

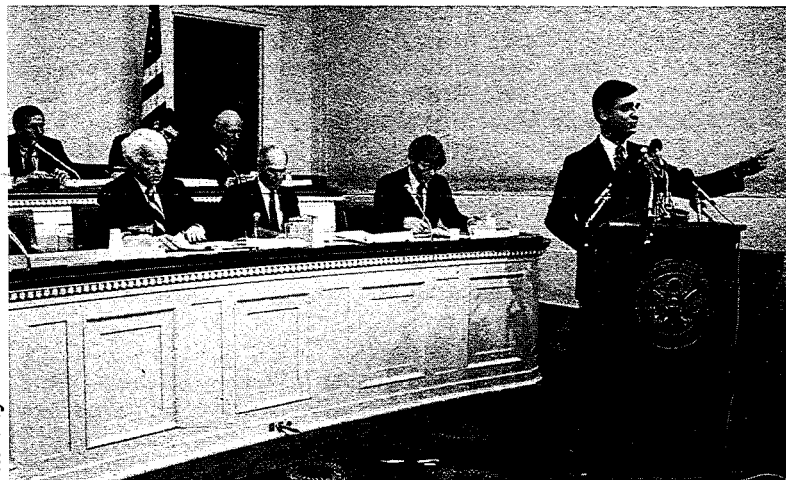


Photo by Rebecca Hammel

Rep. Paul Henry addresses a December 7 news conference on religious discrimination against Christians in the U.S.S.R. Seated on back row, from left, Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.), Dick Rodgers, and Ernest Gordon of CREED; front row, from left, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Cal.), Rep. John Porter (R-IL.), and Kent Hill of the IRD.

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IRD membership is \$25.00 per year; a subscription to the newsletter is \$15.00 per year (and is included in the annual membership fee). Tax-deductible contributions in any amount are welcome.

# Religious Liberty Alert

## Needed: Prayer for Imprisoned Christians in the U.S.S.R.

The prayer and advocacy support of U.S. Christians can do much to alleviate the suffering of our brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union. One of the main projects of the Coalition for Solidarity with Christians in the USSR is its "Adopt-a-Prisoner" campaign. The Coalition is currently seeking 110 individuals to commit their support to an imprisoned Soviet believer.

Those imprisoned need spiritual support which we in the West can provide through prayer. Letters are also a great source of encouragement. Even in those instances when letters have not been delivered to the prisoner, those letters have clearly communicated to Soviet authorities that the fate of the prisoners is a matter of deep concern for Western Christians. Many of the recently-released prisoners have stressed how important it is that the Soviet authorities, including their immediate guards, know that people outside of the Soviet Union are aware of their plight.

An "adopter" can also write letters of encouragement to the prisoner's family. Families of prisoners often feel isolated and helpless, and often suffer from indignities perpetrated by neighbors and co-workers. The family may have ways of contacting the prisoner, thus informing him that his plight is known in the West.

It is the Coalition's goal that each prisoner of conscience be adopted by at least one Western Christian. This program is ideal for individuals, families, youth groups, congregations or Bible study groups.

### Urgent Cases

**Vasili Shipilov** — A 65-year old Russian Orthodox who has been in psychiatric hospitals and prisons for 47 of the last 48 years. He has been beaten because he fasts and crosses himself.

**Father Vladimir Rusak** — A 38-year old Russian Orthodox deacon sentenced to prison (and eventual exile). He wrote a letter to the WCC in 1983 outlining the plight of religious believers.

**Ivan Antonov** — A 68-year old leader of an underground Baptist church. Now he is in exile in Siberia.

**Gederts Melngailis** — A 35-year old Latvian Lutheran who is in psychiatric hospital for charity work. He has been forcibly injected with unnecessary drugs.

**Viktoras Petkus** — A 57-year old Lithuanian Catholic who is serving his third prison sentence for monitoring Soviet compliance with the Helsinki Accords.

If you would like to adopt a prisoner(s), please write to the Coalition for Solidarity with Christians in the USSR, 729 15th Street, NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC, 20005. If you prefer a specific denomination or nationality, please specify. A free Adopt-a-Prisoner brochure is available. Quantities of the brochure (suitable for distribution to an entire congregation) are also available at cost. — LMG



Tens of thousands gathered in Washington on Dec. 6 to call for unrestricted emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union.

(Big Chill, cont'd from page 2)

next vigil will be on behalf of Vasili Shipilov, a Russian Orthodox believer imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals and prisons for 47 of the last 48 years.

Other Coalition speakers at the news briefing included Mr. Victor Nakas, Washington branch manager of Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid, and Dr. Ernest Gordon, president of Christian Rescue Effort for the Emancipation of Dissidents (CREED).

(An edited transcript of the press conference is available from the IRD for \$1.50; \$1.35 for IRD members. Please ask for Briefing Paper No. 9.)

The National Council of Churches (NCC) also conducted a public event during the summit — an international prayer vigil for peace. The Rev. Dr. Arie Brouwer, General Secretary of the NCC, and Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk, the head of an eight-man delegation of Soviet clergy, jointly signed a letter which was delivered to President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev which stated that both clergymen would pray that the signing of the INF treaty would "open the way to rapid progress in other areas as well." The NCC-sponsored vigil did not address the issue of Christian prisoners of conscience.

Commendably, at the Dec. 6 rally on behalf of Soviet Jewry, Dr. Brouwer had declared that Christians are "duty bound" to demand freedom for Jews. However, at the Soviet Embassy on Dec. 8, when speaking directly to Mr. Gorbachev, Dr. Brouwer praised the policies of glasnost and perestroika. Implying that these new policies justified NCC methods for dealing with the Soviet authorities, as well as Soviet churchmen, Dr. Brouwer said that glasnost has "improved the reputation of the NCC." According to observers at the embassy, Brouwer went on to argue that it is the Religious Right which is the direct cause of fear of the Soviet Union.

— Lisa M. Gibney

(An IRD staff member, Miss Gibney coordinates the Adopt-a-Prisoner program for the Coalition for Solidarity with Christians in the USSR.)

# Central America: Resources For Study

U.S. policy regarding Central America remains one of the most divisive public debates, as well as a source of great contention within our churches. The following resources offer some of the best analyses of this turbulent region, each from a solidly pro-democratic perspective.

**Central American Peace and Democracy Watch Bulletin** is the bi-weekly newsletter for a recently formed ad hoc committee for the full implementation of the Central American Peace Plan. It offers brief analysis and opinion on the current situation in Central America. For more information contact the Central American Peace and Democracy Watch, 2025 Eye St., NW, Suite 218, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 347-3997.

**Directory of National Organizations Dealing With Central America** is a valuable resource guide published by the World Without War Council. The directory describes the work and policies of 38 U.S. organizations (from both ends of the religious and political spectrum) which are currently active in the Central American debate. The different groups cover topics which range from religious liberty and human rights to peace, freedom and American security. A copy of the directory is available for \$5.00 by writing the World Without War Council, 1514 N.E. 45th St., Seattle, WA 98105.

**The Continuing Crisis: U.S. Policy in Central America and the Caribbean**, edited by Mark Falcoff and Robert Royal. One of the best introductory books available for understanding the complex political climate in contemporary Central America. A 546-page anthology, it consists of thirty different essays; among the various contributors are Fidel Castro, Ronald Reagan, Daniel Ortega, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo and Cardinal John J. O'Connor. Available for \$14 from University Press of America, c/o Orders Dept., 4720 A Boston Way Lanham, MD 20706.

**Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family**, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Shirley Christian. This is probably the best book available for anyone interested in understanding the history of Nicaragua and its people. Ms. Christian has provided a rare contribution to today's often polarized debate -- an extremely well written and objective analysis of the events leading to and following the 1979 Sandinista revolution. Available for \$8.95 from Random House, c/o Orders Department., 400 Hahn Road., Westminster, MD 21157.

**"A Permanent People's Struggle"** is a documentary video produced by the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development. The film is about the labor situation in Nicaragua and El Salvador and compellingly records the workers' frustrated struggle for democratic freedoms. This 35-minute video provides workers and campesinos an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words without fear of misrepresentation by a self-proclaimed vanguard of the people. It is available for \$12.00 from AIFLD/AFL-CIO, 1015 20th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036.

The **Central American Crisis Reader**, edited by Robert Leiken and Barry Rubin. There is much to digest in this 691 page anthology, but any individual seeking to expand his knowledge and make an informed judgment on the Central American crisis will greatly benefit from this important book. Available for \$12.95 from Summit Books, Simon and Schuster Building, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

**Breaking Faith: The Sandinista Revolution and Its Impact on Freedom and Christian Faith in Nicaragua**, by Humberto Belli. An important book for anyone interested in the current debate over religion and politics in Nicaragua. The author is a native Nicaraguan, a lawyer and a former member of the Sandinista Front. Available for \$8.95 from the Puebla Institute, 910 17th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20006.

**Fleeing Their Homeland: A Report on the Testimony of Nicaraguan Refugees to Conditions in Their Country and the Reasons for Their Flight**, is also published by the Puebla Institute. The result of over 100 interviews with Nicaraguan refugees, this booklet documents the primary reasons why some 10 percent of Nicaragua's population has fled that country since the 1979 Sandinista revolution. Copies of the report are available for \$6.00 from the Puebla Institute, 910 17th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20006.

**C.P.D.H. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Nicaragua** is also published by the Puebla Institute. This is the most recent (October 1987) comprehensive report on the human rights situation in Nicaragua by that country's only independent human rights organization -- the Permanent Commission on Human Rights of Nicaragua. Available for \$3.50 from the Puebla Institute, 910 17th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20006.

**The Democratic Mask: The Consolidation of the Sandinista Revolution**, by Douglas W. Payne is a carefully documented historical survey of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. This book offers a concise but comprehensive account of the Sandinistas' strategy to achieve their Marxist-Leninist goals through what Payne calls a "carefully manufactured democratic cover." Available for \$5.00 from Freedom House, 48 East 21st St., New York, NY 10010.

**Political Hospitality and Tourism: Cuba and Nicaragua**, by Paul Hollander. The author reminds us of the ability of repressive Marxist-Leninist regimes to take advantage of, and deceive, well intentioned but naive Western visitors. Hollander describes how today's "political pilgrims" find much to praise after returning to the West from the latest guided tours of today's socialist "kingdoms" in Cuba and Nicaragua. Available for \$3.00 from the Cuban American National Foundation, 1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW, Suite 601, Washington, DC 20007.

**The Barren Fig Tree: A Christian Reappraisal of the Sandinista Revolution**, by Sr. Camilla Mullay and Fr. Robert Barry. This IRD study booklet is a reflection on the 1979 Sandinista revolution and its impact on freedom and independence in Nicaraguan society. Copies are available from the IRD for \$3.00.

— Richard S. Sperbeck

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a group of church activists who traveled to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Our purpose on these trips was to meet with persons representing a wide variety of perspectives, so as to assess better the prospects for peace. We also wished to manifest our solidarity with Central American Christians.

## Political Crisis, Church Growth

On our trips we sensed the pressures which those sisters and brothers experience daily. The conflicts in both El Salvador and Nicaragua have pushed millions to the brink of survival. In El Salvador we visited peasants who had fled the war-torn countryside, only to find in the city that wartime austerity left them without a steady job. In Nicaragua things were worse. We saw peasant children with swollen bellies and thin hair, symptomatic of malnutrition. Stores were often bare of essential foodstuffs, and when those were available, prices were too high and rations too meager to suffice.

There were chilling reports of indiscriminate violence. We heard of a block captain gunned down on a San Salvador street corner by unknown assailants, of Nicaraguan young men taken away and killed for refusing to serve in the Sandinista army. Graffiti were nearly all political, and they projected militance and hatred. Not surprisingly, the climate of deprivation and violence causes fears to multiply. Many with whom we talked suddenly became reticent when a public conversation turned toward controversial issues. Only in private would they open up.

Nevertheless, by the grace of God, the churches of Central America have been strengthened. In both El Salvador and Nicaragua, evangelicals (Protestants) have increased from less than 5 percent of the population a decade ago to 15-20 percent today. An evangelistic crusade which we attended in Managua drew an enthusiastic crowd in the tens of thousands. By various accounts the Nicaraguan Catholic Church has experienced a renewal of its spirituality. Worshipers at masses we attended showed a devotion that was more than formal.

Perhaps the political crisis has caused those suffering its effects to seek a more firmly-grounded faith. Certainly it has prompted much theological reflection. And in this field the left-leaning liberation theologians have by no means carried the day. Many Catholics and evangelicals set forth biblical, reasoned alternatives to liberation theology.

## Taking the Measure of Freedom

Undoubtedly, we could not have witnessed these signs of spiritual life if Central American churches did not enjoy a fair measure of freedom. None of the Christians we met spoke of churches being padlocked, Bibles being confiscated, or believers being sent to psychiatric hospitals. Nicaragua, in particular, is not to this point a totalitarian state committed to the extinction of all religion. But this is not to say that Christians there and in El Salvador do not suffer under political pressures. The conflicts dividing those two nations have affected their churches, but in very different ways. And those differences in the



Photo taken on IRD trip in Managua, back row, from left: Ervin Duggan (Presbyterians for Democracy & Religious Freedom), Alan Wisdom, pastor Boanerges Mendoza, a parishioner, Kent Hill. Front, from left: John Boone (PDRF), Randy Frame (Christianity Today), Kathy Kirsten (Lutherans for Religious & Political Freedom), Tom Wisely (Seattle Pacific University). Diane Krüppers (Episcopal Comm. on Religion & Freedom) took the picture.

state of religious freedom spring from differences between the political systems being constructed.

In El Salvador most aspects of church life -- like much of life in general -- proceed vigorously with little reference to politics. Government officials articulated no long-range policy toward the Church, other than seeking the help of the Catholic bishops in mediating the peace process. Where church leaders have endured physical and other attacks, these resulted less from government policy than from being caught in a struggle of political extremes not under governmental control. Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez, for instance, told us of receiving anonymous death threats because of his charitable work with individuals accused of guerrilla ties.

Many Salvadorans expressed anxiety at being compromised in political affairs. Benjamin Cestoni, head of the official human rights commission, gave a frank explanation of the problem: El Salvador has democratic structures, and there is a broad desire for democracy; however, many of the structures do not work adequately, and the people do not trust them enough to make them work. The military, especially, is not under sufficient civilian control, and the judicial system has yet to punish high-ranking military offenders against human rights. But even Maria Julia Hernandez of Tutela Legal, a Catholic human rights group inclined toward the Left, acknowledged that human rights violations have declined dramatically under the Duarte administration. She attributed the improvement to human rights conditions attached to U.S. foreign aid.

In Nicaragua, by contrast, the problem lies in the structures themselves. The Sandinista program, which the ruling comandantes have repeatedly defined as Marxist-Leninist, calls for the participation of all social sectors in a "revolutionary process" led by the Sandinista "vanguard." Young people are steered into the Sandinista Youth, workers into the Sandinista Confederation of Labor, peasants into Sandinista agricultural cooperatives, and so forth.

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With regard to religion, the Sandinista policy of co-optation has operated through the "Popular Church" among Catholics and the Evangelical Committee for Development Aid (CEPAD) among Protestants. These groups do not belong to the Sandinista Front; however, they work closely with it and defend it against foreign criticism.

Thus almost every Nicaraguan is forced to make a political choice: whether to join the pro-Sandinista organizations or to stay out of "the revolutionary process." Those who join can enjoy the benefits, while those who stay out expose themselves to a consistent pattern of abuse. Most of the independent leaders we met had been imprisoned at some time. Opposition politicians described how scores of their mid-level cadres had been targeted for arrests or draft call-ups. Officials of the non-governmental Permanent Commission on Human Rights (CPDH) documented many cases of rural villagers suspected of contra sympathies being detained in mass or forced to relocate. Owners of independent media outlets told of publications and radio news programs banned by the Ministry of Interior.

Yet the most common form of pressure may be economic. A business leader listed for us the many levers the government has over any private enterprise: the authority to fix wages and prices, a monopoly over banking and exports, provisions allowing arbitrary seizures of land and other property, and the power to dispense or withhold ration cards and import permits. All of these tools are used to favor those who conform to the Sandinista line and to make life hard for those who do not.

Churches not supportive of the government have encountered the same treatment. Several evangelical pastors recounted to us their experiences in prison. A Catholic priest reported several recent incidents: mob attacks, tampering with his truck, and the discovery that his altar boy was a State Security plant. Pastors without Sandinista ties complained of economic discrimination. Not belonging to CEPAD, they lacked access to government-subsidized supplies — from building materials for their churches

to food for their families. They were forced onto the black market, where goods cost several times as much.

The National Council of Evangelical Pastors (CNPEN) has been repeatedly denied legal status, preventing it from receiving foreign contributions, and its activities have often been hindered. Someone outside CNPEN suggested that this harassment was simply "political," provoked by the pastors' "counter-revolutionary" attitudes. Yet religious freedom consists not just in that which is available to those who support the government, but particularly in that which is available to those whose consciences forbid them to cooperate with the state.

## Talking With CEPAD

Nevertheless, we considered it necessary to listen also to those Nicaraguan Christians who have been pro-Sandinista. On all our trips we met with CEPAD officials to discuss our differences. Those officials felt strongly that IRD publications had defamed them personally and damaged the unity of the churches within CEPAD. They stressed that they were not Marxists, that CEPAD was not an arm of the Sandinista Front, and that it had no links to State Security. They asserted that their praise of the government related to social programs in which they had participated, whereas they had disagreed with Sandinista policies in some other areas.

Specifically, Dr. Gustavo Parajon, President of CEPAD, expressed his desire for an immediate end to the state of emergency, the dropping of all media restrictions, and a broad amnesty for political prisoners. Dr. Parajon seemed confident, though, of the government's good faith in delaying these promised democratizing measures. He appeared willing to accept the excuse that further liberalization might not be possible until after the war had ended. Other CEPAD-related leaders dismissed IRD warnings about Marxist-Leninist tendencies and religious persecution in Nicaragua. They claimed to have seen little evidence so far of such dangers, and they rejected comparisons between the Sandinistas and communist regimes elsewhere.

We of the IRD responded by affirming our understanding of CEPAD as a Christian organization, in which many churches participate purely so as to do humanitarian work. When CEPAD acts in a partisan manner, we do not ascribe that stance to its entire membership. We reassured CEPAD officials, too, that we do not mean to dispute either their integrity or their sincerity. Instead, we said, our questions concern the wisdom of a church group entering into such close embrace with a Marxist government.

Unfortunately, much that we heard on our trips reinforced that concern. One U.S. missionary with CEPAD put the situation this way: "We are not Sandinistas, but we are walking down the same road with them." Several pastors reiterated charges which had been aired in previous IRD publications: that CEPAD discriminates among aid recipients according to their standing with government authorities; that CEPAD funds and supplies are diverted to government agencies; that criticisms made internally to



Photo by Kent Hill

*Hundreds came forward at an evangelistic crusade in Managua led by Puerto Rican evangelist G.G. Avila.*

(Peace Watch, cont'd on page 7)



*As elsewhere in Nicaragua, the IRD delegation found evidence of both brutal poverty and sincere religious devotion in the town of Masaya.*

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CEPAD have ended up in the hands of State Security interrogators, who cite them as proof of subversion against the state. We cannot verify these charges, but we can testify that they are widely believed inside Nicaragua. If there are divisions within the Nicaraguan evangelical community, these cannot be blamed on articles published by the IRD in English in the United States.

### **Facing Deep Conflict, Steady Support Needed**

What difference, then, has the Central American peace agreement made? Some, but not enough yet. Many with whom we talked were pessimistic that true national reconciliations could be achieved.

In El Salvador the government has released almost all of its political prisoners. According to Tutela Legal, only 24 remain in jail. Several leaders of the Democratic Revolutionary Front, a civilian wing of the FMLN guerrilla movement, returned briefly to San Salvador to test the waters for a re-entry into the political process. The freedom with which they moved about and spoke, at rallies and on television, demonstrated the much wider political space now open to them. At negotiations held in October, the government invited the rebels to occupy that space and contest the coming elections. But the FMLN representatives, raising concerns about their own safety and the continuation of U.S. aid to the government, refused to lay down their guns. They vowed to continue their armed struggle until they were guaranteed a share of power.

In Nicaragua the Sandinista government has allowed the newspaper La Prensa to resume publishing and Catholic Radio to return to the air. La Prensa has used its new freedom to blast away at the Sandinistas with both barrels, under headlines such as "FSLN Would Lose Elections" and "Corruption: the Dance of Millions." But many smaller publications and over twenty radio news programs are still closed. The government has pardoned some 1,000

political prisoners; however, 3,000-8,000 others remain behind bars. According to Lino Hernandez of the unofficial human rights commission, convictions in the special political tribunals have increased since August from 20 per month to over 50 per month.

Catholic and Protestant leaders report a relaxation of pressure on them, as illustrated by the lack of interference with outdoor Catholic observances or with the recent evangelistic crusade. The crusade coordinator attributed that freedom to a long, careful effort to persuade the government that the event would not touch on politics. Some pastors also credited the publicity focused on the October 1985 arrests of independent evangelical leaders with having helped to deter similar crackdowns. But those churchmen whom the Sandinistas hold in suspicion remain conscious of being closely watched.

The Nicaraguan government has opened indirect conversations with the contra rebels regarding a cease-fire. Its proposals for the cease-fire, though, amount merely to procedures for a contra surrender. The Sandinistas have rejected any discussion of fundamental constitutional changes which would loosen their stranglehold on power.

President Daniel Ortega declared that the Sandinista Front would never lose an election, and if it did, "what it would give up would be the government, but not the power" (Washington Post, Dec. 15, 1987). His brother Humberto echoed the note of intransigence: "The right should not think that the workers will not force them to pay historically -- and even more if there is a (U.S.) invasion. Let the right tremble before the justice dealt by our people" (New York Times, Dec. 17, 1987). Both Ortegases have confirmed that they are considering building up their armed forces to a total of 600,000 regulars, reserves, and militiamen.

Such statements give grounds for fear that the peace process may come up short. Although the Guatemala accords have produced some positive results, the social conflicts, the ideological divides in El Salvador and Nicaragua may be too deep to be bridged in a few months. The pursuit of democracy and national reconciliation may take much longer.

In the meantime, we need to strengthen those institutions -- especially the churches -- which can equip the people for democracy and reconciliation. In El Salvador we must support, in prayer and materially, a spiritual revival which will yield the moral values conducive to making a free society work. In Nicaragua we must sustain the marginalized, harassed, and generally poor Christians trying to live out their faith in tension with an ominous "revolutionary process." Indeed, this is a challenge to the mainline U.S. Protestant denominations, which have heretofore concentrated their funds and attention on Central American groups sympathetic to the non-democratic Left. Perhaps it is time for those denominations to rethink their priorities.

—Alan F. Wisdom

## RCDA Celebrates 25 Years of "Faithful Witness"

"They have faithfully witnessed, and their witness will not return void," said IRD Board member Richard John Neuhaus at the 25th anniversary celebration of the quarterly journal RCDA -- Religion in Communist Dominated Areas. Pastor Neuhaus was referring to a 75-year-old native of Czechoslovakia, The Rev. Blahoslav Hruby, and his irrepressible wife Olga. The Hrubys, with initial financial assistance from the National Council of Churches (the NCC claimed budgetary constraints in 1971 and withdrew its annual funding), founded RCDA in 1962 to collect and publish information on the religious environment within communist countries. For a quarter of a century, the Hrubys have documented and focused attention on the systematic violation of religious liberty and other fundamental human rights in societies controlled by an officially atheistic state.

As the Hrubys and RCDA celebrate a 25th anniversary, even a cursory look at its history will demonstrate its success. Numerous Christians, Jews, Muslims, political dissidents and others are free today because of the faithful efforts of the Hrubys and those involved, directly and indirectly, with RCDA.

Recently, Natalia Solzhenitsyn, wife of author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, recounted her first encounter with RCDA: "I simply could not believe my eyes. I saw there a detailed description of difficulties and sufferings...I ran with the journal to Alexander and cried: 'They know everything! They understand everything!'" She continued later, saying: "People like Blahoslav and Olga Hruby belong to a very small flock. That small flock spend their lifetimes, and sleepless nights, and waste their health, being concerned about the fact that yet one more person is suffering for the confession of the faith of Christ." (Presbyterian Survey, Oct. 1987)

You may send the Hrubys your congratulations and learn more about their work by writing Blahoslav and Olga Hruby, c/o Religion in Communist Dominated Areas, 475 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10115. — RSS

## The United Church of Christ and Violent "Liberation"

Calling its international humanitarian aid policy "vague," the United Church of Christ's Board for World Ministries (BWM) recently "clarified" the denomination's guidelines at its annual meeting. Until recently the UCC's official policy has allowed humanitarian assistance only to organizations committed to a non-violent resolution of conflict. However, according to the statement passed at the meeting, the UCC agency can now provide humanitarian aid to liberation movements "engaged in the struggle for justice in situations of actual or potential violence."

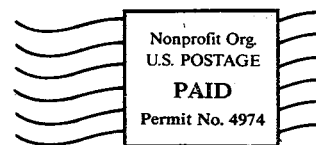
Traditionally, said the Rev. Scott Libbey, chief executive of the BWM, the UCC has been, and remains, "absolutely" opposed to any direct or indirect support of violence. However, he contradicted that position by adding that "programs of merit should not be disqualified because sponsoring organizations also support the use of force against tyranny."

Audrey Smock, a spokesperson for the UCC mission agency, denied allegations that the new policy was implemented to permit the provision of financial assistance to the African National Congress (ANC) or the Southwest Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO). Both organizations receive substantial financial assistance from some mainline denominations and the "Special Fund" of the World Council of Churches' Program to Combat Racism. And, in contrast to more peaceful reconciliation efforts within southern Africa, both are actively engaged in violent resistance to the South African government.

Ms. Smock, criticizing the concentration on what she called the "sensational nature" of the resolution, said the larger focus of the new policy is "to enter into a fuller and more meaningful dialogue with partner churches in crisis situations."

According to BWM officials, an extensive evaluation will be made of each organization that requests assistance, and groups to be considered must demonstrate their commitment to "democratic principles" and the "genuine self-determination and liberation of their country's people." — RSS

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