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Baptists Aid Managua
Earthquake Victims

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By A. Clark Scanlon

MANAGUA (BP)--Exploding firecrackers and Roman candles are the sounds that usually greet Christmas morning in Managua, Nicaragua, but Christmas, 1972, brought sounds of crackling flames that turned blocks of homes and markets into charred posts and twisted tin.

It brought the sounds of buildings giving way and of wailing in the streets while 5,000 or more people lay dead under the piles of debris.

By Dec. 23 the world was aware that just after midnight an earthquake measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale had convulsed the heart of Managua, Nicaragua's tropical capital city of nearly 500,000 inhabitants.

By Christmas Eve, Baker J. Cauthen, executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board with Charles W. Bryan, the board's secretary for Middle American and the Caribbean, had committed the board to an initial expenditure of \$5,000 for disaster relief. Two weeks later another \$5,000 was appropriated by the board.

Ruben Diaz, president of the Baptist Convention of Guatemala, and I immediately contacted the Nicaraguan Embassy in Guatemala City for permission to take food, which radio announcements declared to be in such short supply.

Pastor Diaz and missionary William W. Stennett worked on purchasing essential foods: 500 pounds of beans, 500 pounds of rice, 300 pounds of sugar, powdered milk and other supplies. Guatemalan Baptist churches contributed bread, lard, two-gallon plastic jugs for water and candles.

Armed with an export permit from the emergency committee of the Guatemalan army, Pastor Diaz and I headed for the border of El Salvador.

On crossing the Salvadoran border, the officials told us we could not take our truck into the country since we had photostatic copies and not the original papers on it. A superior official finally said that, in view of the situation, we could pass. We felt it was an answer to prayer.

Two hours later we picked up fresh information on the situation in Nicaragua from Roger Valasquez, pastor of the First Baptist Church of San Salvador. He said it was possible to get into Managua, where Dr. Gustavo A. Parajon, a Baptist physician, was heading an emergency committee of evangelical Christians.

Another two hours took us to the border and into Honduras. A short trip took us through the strip of Honduras that separates El Salvador from Nicaragua. There in the dust, a line of vehicles awaited entry into Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan flag flew at half-mast in recognition of the national tragedy.

As dark approached we picked up a Honduran Boy Scout on his way to lend emergency service in Nicaragua.

Just after 8:00 we pulled into the colonial city of Leon, about 54 miles from Managua. The tree-lined streets of the entrance seemed quieter than we had expected.

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This city already had felt the impact of the refugees. Although its normal population is around 50,000, an estimated 40,000 refugees now were living with friends and relatives.

At the First Baptist Church, a congregation of some 70 members, we found that 12 Baptist families with from five to eight members each had already been located in Leon.

The church held a prayer meeting for them and was trying to find ways of feeding them. We took out some of the rice, beans, corn and milk to leave with Oscar Espino, the pastor.

At 8:00 a.m. the next day we received permission from the army commandant at Leon to enter Managua. An hour and a half later we circled the dry hills that surround Managua. During the last two years Nicaragua has suffered a severe drought that worsened the tragedy because of the already short supply of food.

Traffic picked up as trucks and a few cars entered the outer perimeter of the city. Soldiers in battle dress carried rifles and automatic weapons and had white handkerchiefs over their faces because of the dust and the smell of decay that was present in the city.

Entering the outskirts of the city, we grasped the magnitude of the destruction gradually because the parks and plazas seemed undisturbed. To the right, an encampment of some 300 blue tents sweltered in the late morning sun.

A few telephones attached to trees offered some communication. gasoline stations lay with collapsed roofs on pumps as workmen began repairing the structures.

In the city proper we saw soldiers in a command post set up in a park just below the presidential palace. Workers cleared the streets with picks, shovels and bulldozers.

Many houses were of poor construction, adobe and rock, and my first impression was that only the poorly constructed houses had fallen. Then I noted a curious thing: many times a house seemed to be standing intact but, looking through the windows, you could see that the house was just a shell with the roof caved in.

At the Baptist high school we found a number of trucks and jeeps parked beside the half-destroyed two-story high school building where relief committees were at work.

The one-story elementary school next to it showed only slight effects of the earthquake and had become the center for Baptists and other evangelicals helping the 200,000 people still around Managua.

Heading the committee was Dr. Gustavo A. Parajon, who had seen the destruction of the Baptist hospital where he had been a doctor. He made notes, gave orders, and tried to bring system from chaos.

Under a tin shed nearby, some elderly women rested on cots out of the burning tropical sun. In the side of the school a temporary kitchen had been set up.

As we unloaded the sacks of food, we found that even the water we brought was welcome. The workers, who had been depending on two barrels of water a day that some Mennonites had been bringing to the school, immediately filled their five-gallon jugs.

My impression was: here is order in the midst of chaos. Here is a willingness to work and help others in the midst of tragedy.

Soon two pickup trucks rolled in from Costa Rica. In one were Laverne Gregory, a Southern Baptist missionary, and Guido Picado, evangelism director for Costa Rican Baptists.

Missionary Hugh Smith of the American Baptist Churches, serving as executive minister of Nicaraguan Baptists, appeared at the door of the school. He is finding Baptists throughout the country and putting them back in contact with churches.

Dr. Parajon was asked what was needed. He replied, "Nicaragua already had needs because of the drought. Now suddenly a city of 400,000 to 500,000 is destroyed.

"The markets burned. People are without jobs. Some 200,000 still are living around Managua. Another 300,000 have left. This represents nearly one-third of the population of the country.

"Nutritionists calculate that people need a pound of food a day," Dr. Parajon continued. "That will represent 500,000 pounds of food a day. If Baptists can take care of their own with food, tents and medicine, we will have accomplished a great thing.

"I hope to ask the government for a barrio (a neighborhood) where we as evangelical Christians can supply their needs as a testimony in the name of Christ."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A. Clark Scanlon, a Southern Baptist missionary, is the Foreign Mission Board's field representative for Middle America.

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BP PHOTOS to be mailed to state Baptist paper editors.

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