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Introduction to the Campo (Countryside) Experience

The campo experience for many people is the highlight of their time in Nicaragua. Experiencing other cultures and realities, particularly those of a lower income country, allow us to gain insight into how most of the world's population lives. The major goal is to experience, acquire understanding and learn from those whose lives are very different from yours. That will mean leaving much of yourself behind and giving yourself to the situation and to the Nicaraguan people around you. You will need to trust them and depend on them, which is not something that most of us (U.S. Americans in particular) are used to doing.

Many times you may feel that there is nothing to do but sit, to which many of us are unaccustomed or are uncomfortable. Let it be a time of thinking and observing. Conversations may develop slowly; people are comfortable with long silences. Other times the conversation moves rapidly.

One way to observe life in the campo is to look at different aspects of life. It takes a great deal of work to observe and understand well what you see because we interpret everything through our particular frame of reference. This experience will likely force you to put aside your "glasses" and put on someone else's. The questions below can be seen as a tool for expanding your understanding of the people who have opened their homes and lives to you and which will, in turn, help you better understand yourself.

A second goal is to reflect on who you are, as a person formed by a particular culture, and what your role is in the world, as you understand it. We cannot learn about others without reflecting on ourselves. We cannot understand ourselves until we can see at a distance the culture that has shaped us. This campo experience is an opportunity to look at yourself in a new way. This, too, is part of understanding peace and justice issues, or Christian mission, because ultimately all relationships begin with individual responses to situations.

Take note of your observations, reactions and feelings. What you are about to do is not easy. You will no doubt experience some discomfort in some aspect of your physical life related to eating, sleeping, bathing or going to the bathroom. What are your reactions?

You will also likely experience some discomfort related to social interactions. What does it feel like to not be able to communicate your thoughts or even your needs? What is it like to not know the correct way to act in a given situation?

However challenging the experience, it is key to understanding the reality of the majority of the world. You will enlarge your vision of the world and your understanding of yourself. Allow yourself that opportunity.

Reflection Questions: Deepening the Experience

Basic Needs:

- How do people get their food? Do they grow it? Buy it? What varieties of food do they eat? How much does their income and time is spend obtaining and preparing food?
- What are their houses made of? What does the design and placement of the houses tell you about the resources and social relationships?
- What is the source of water? Is the community satisfied with their water?
- How far is the nearest health clinic or hospital? What is available right in the community?
- How does the available transportation affect their basic needs?

Relationships:

- What are relationships like between men and women, neighbors and outsiders, adults and children? How and where do neighbors interact? What does the arrangement of their houses tell you about community values and relationships?
- How do the number of people in the community, the type of work they do and their geographic surroundings affect their relationships?
- What are the predominant influences from the outside? (Teacher, technicians, government workers?)

Community Decision Making:

- Who has the power?
- How are decisions made?
- What do various people see as the great strengths and need of the community?



Education:

- How are the young taught the values and skills of the community?
- What formal educational opportunities exist? Why or why not are they utilized to their maximum?
- What informal education opportunities exist? (Church studies, etc.)

Recreation:

- How do people relax and enjoy themselves?
- What facilities are available for recreation?

Beliefs and Values:

- How do they express their understanding of the world?
- What is important to them? What is the “good life”?
- What role does religion play in their lives?
- What is their view of time?
- What meaning does work have? What is the main purpose in life?