

Joplin church continues charity work in La Rosas

Written by Roger Ray FOR THE NEWS-LEADER

Ozark religious and civic organizations have a history of hands-on charity both in the immediate area and abroad. However, in light of the painfully sick American economy coupled with one of American history's most destructive natural events taking place just down I-44 in Joplin, the enthusiasm for foreign charity comes under greater scrutiny.

But at least for Rev. Aaron Brown, of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Joplin, neither the economy nor the disaster has changed his congregation's mission to serve the poor in Haiti and Nicaragua. On May 22, 2011, the explosive tornado completely destroyed the homes of 99 church members and flattened a third of their church campus, destroying their worship center. And yet, the next week, they sent \$4,000 to Haiti for water filtration equipment and have maintained their \$20,000 per year support to a tiny jungle village, La Rosas, in Nicaragua.

"Our mission," Brown explains, "is to love God, love one another and serve the world. Neither the economy nor the tornado changes that."

About La Rosas

La Rosas is a village of about 300 residents in the state of Matagalpa. It is situated in the mountains, where the only employment has been seasonal work on nearby coffee plantations. Starvation and malnutrition hit a crisis level in this region in 2003, prompting the Rainbow Network to expand into this area, which was designated as one of the most economically depressed in the Western Hemisphere by United Nations analysts.

About The Rainbow Network

Keith Jaspers, founder of the Rainbow Network, a non-governmental organization doing relief work in Nicaragua, was recently called back out of retirement to give direction to the Rainbow Network as they attempt to rebuild their donor base. Roger Ray is a former board member of the Rainbow Network and a regular contributor to the News-Leader. The two are traveling together in Nicaragua this week, visiting some of the more than 100 rural villages served by the Rainbow Network. Ray will be submitting stories about their travels this week.

Brown first visited La Rosas in 2006 and, with his congregation's support, St. Paul's agreed to sponsor the village through the

Rainbow Network providing regular doctor visits, supporting an elementary school, a feeding center for children and providing small loans to start home businesses. In a region where malnutrition and lack of medical care brought death and blindness to many children a few years ago, Brown now says, "I see healthy, plump babies and families growing crops to feed themselves and to sell to other villages."

High school is not provided by the government of Nicaragua so students, especially in the rural villages, have to travel a long distance, and they depend on sponsors to pay tuition so that they can receive an education.

"The students I met in 2006 have all graduated from high school now," Brown said. "You can see that they have a future now." The partnership between a Joplin church that has recovered from a disaster and an impoverished village in Nicaragua is a testament to compassion even in the midst of our domestic challenges.