

Astrid about the difficult year of 2023



The six core members of the former Ruach Community Home: Manuel, Daniel, Loyda, Jonathan, Maria Elena and Miguel

Nicaragua today... The fate of the Ruach

Foundation was not helped by the difficult context of the country in which it was operating. Some examples are:

- There are critical voices in the Catholic Church against this government. As a result, several priests have already received a prison sentence based on false accusations of e.g. sexual abuse without a fair trial.
- A bishop, Mgr. Rolando Álvarez - from the northern city of Matagalpa – was jailed because he is too critical and therefore 'against the national interest'. He could still be free if he had joined a group of 222 political prisoners who were suddenly released earlier this year, and exiled to the US. But as he wanted to consult with the bishops first, he was driven from the airport back to prison and the next day, in a closed court hearing, sentenced to 26 years in prison.
- NGOs are constantly being forced to close down by the Government: already around 4,000.
- Miss “Universe,” chosen in November 2023, is Nicaraguan. Many people celebrated enthusiastically by taking to the streets, but the government clamped down on these folk parties. The director of the company which trains girls for this type of election was no longer allowed to re-enter Nicaragua upon return from Miss Universe event, and her husband and son were arrested without explanation and disappeared. Miss Universe herself has not returned to Nicaragua. She is also linked to the 2018 uprisings.

The trend is clear: the more you go against the government, the harder the re-action.

The Ruach Foundation

The developments in and around the Ruach Foundation where I worked till August 2022 were generally not encouraging in 2023. Financial resources dwindled. The chairlady and her son with disabilities moved out of the community home after

they had been living for a while. Staff was laid off. One of the core members, Daniel, was hospitalized twice. Also little news on the Ruach Facebook page: so the situation did not seem rosy.

According to the Foundation’s statutes,

new Board elections were due in July because the term of the current Board (2 years) was expiring. I was invited as a member of the General Assembly. It was reported that the Community Home would be closed at the end of August due to lack of funds, and that the Ministry of Interior would be requested to formally close the Foundation. As this was not going to happen any time soon, it was therefore necessary to formally elect a new Ruach Board.

I knew that for none of their families it would be very easy to have their disabled brother/sister/child return home, so I looked for a feasible alternative. Fortunately I found a solution for brother and sister Manuel and Maria Elena. They could be given accommodation in a retirement home in Juigalpa, immediately and for an indefinite period. (This retirement home had enjoyed support from a Juigalpa-Leiden city link relationship, which has now been dissolved.) Maria Elena and Manuel's father was very happy with this opportunity, because he lives on his own (his wife passed away many years ago) a day's journey away from Juigalpa. Of course I visit them regularly with my disabled son Jonathan (and sometimes Daniel) in their new home. They are having a great time! The director is also satisfied with how things are going.



Visiting Maria Elena and Manuel with Jonathan and Daniel

For the other three core members of the Community Home there was no other option: at the end of August they went back to their original families living in Juigalpa.

The plan to set up a new home at the retirement home

I pursued the idea of trying to make adjustments to another building on the grounds of the retirement home and make it suitable for all 5 former Ruach core members, (see picture below). Funds were pledged by Vivir Juntos and friends for some renovation work. I drew up a budget, including the salary costs for one employee until the end of December, and gave an advance to Don Chester (Chairman of the board of the old people's home) to start the work on facilities and room partitions. Don Chester and I also drew up a work contract which the recruited lady Mayra and Don Chester would sign. (I myself have no longer legal status in Nicaragua. Since 2 years I tried to get my residence card renewed and still waiting for the answer). I told Mayra that she could start with work on 1th October. She knew everyone, because she worked with them at the Ruach Community Home for about a year when I was still living at the Community Home. Mayra was keen, and the director of the old people's home was happy that Mayra could be added to his staff as an employee until the end of December and release his own old staff from the extra work involved in looking after Manuel and Maria Elena.



The separate premises to be upgraded

However, by the middle of September there was a surprise announcement by the municipality that the government would take over the retirement home by January 2024. The retirement home would then be run by the municipality by using their own staff without experience.

Of course that was the end of our plan!

It worked out well that two weeks later Jonathan and I went on holiday to visit my daughter Daniella in Ecuador. Due to COVID we had not been there for three years, and it was good to put some distance between ourselves and the troubles in Nicaragua.

More hurdles

Back from Ecuador I started asking around about the situation and most people I spoke too felt that it was all too uncertain to go ahead with this plan given the context of Nicaragua. It was a shock!

- **Catholic Church?** As the Ruach Foundation was not yet officially closed down, and knowing this would take time, the Catholic Church was in no position to help us to step in by setting up a new home under their wing.

- **Another NGO?** Starting a new NGO in a country like Nicaragua where 4,000 NGOs were already forced to close in the past two years is even less realistic.

My conclusion

I have now been in Nicaragua, without work and official status, for over one year.

The prospects and hope for an permanent solution for our former house mates are dwindling and do not seem realistic anymore! So what to do?

I decided it was now time to focus on a settled future for my son Jonathan. I have reached retirement age, and although still healthy and able to take good care of him now, I know this will not last forever. Jonathan needs a permanent place, in a care institution, that can offer him a home, with good quality and affordable care in the short and longer term. There are no options for that in Nicaragua. So my plan is to return to the Netherlands with Jonathan in 2024. It hurts. Of course I informed Week Dutch Missionaries (former employer) and Vivir Juntos about these developments and I am glad they understood and respected my decision. I am going through a grieving process, to let go, and to prepare myself for a big change in our lives.

Returning to the Netherlands will require a lot of effort, and it is unrealistic to expect that Jonathan will find a long-term suitable home within two years. There are waiting lists! I first need to have a residential address in the Netherlands before I even can register with many social care institutions. So I will have Jonathan at home for the first two years. My daughter Daniella is getting married in Ecuador at the end of August. So if Jonathan and I want to be there, I think it is best to travel back to the Netherlands via Ecuador. In August.

Thank you

Our work over the past 8 years had a lot of potential, that's for sure! Could we could have set up more community homes for vulnerable adults? Why not! But life has shown a different path.

I am extremely grateful for all the help and cooperation I have received through Vivir Juntos and through personal contacts, by

email or visits to the Netherlands. It is a fact that together we have made a difference. It is wonderful that we have involved people in Juigalpa, the Netherlands, England and a few elsewhere! Life cannot be assessed by the destination we reach, but by the journey we have taken. And we can be grateful for what we have been able to give to Loyda, Daniel, Maria Elena, Manuel, Miguel, Jonathan, Rommel and Chepito; not to mention the

twenty members of the Activities Club, in their lives, plus those of their family members.

*Thank you for the trust you have had in me; for the opportunities you opened up for me over so many years. I hope you can understand and respect my decision!
Keep in touch!*

Astrid Delleman ajdelleman@zonnet.n

Annex: The Optician's shop MiraMira: a brief history



Since 2021 I have been a co-shareholder of MiraMira. The shop has now been closed.

When I worked at the Fundación Ruach, it became soon clear that we could not constantly depend on foreign money and donations. That's why we thought about starting our own company. So when the idea of an optician's shop came my way and the Ruach Board was enthusiastic, I decided to draft a project proposal. Key part of the proposal was that the Ruach Board and I would be tasked with raising the capital needed for the initial investments. The idea was that profits, which the optician shop would eventually make, would be used to promote the social projects of the Ruach Foundation.

One year later the Board had raised not a single penny, and after some research and consultations with an ophthalmologist in Managua, I was advised that an optician shop should not function within the Ruach Foundation under the same Board, but independently, with people of good will, who would fully support the goal of profit for social work. The proposal was dismissed without discussion within the Board.

Knowing that something had to be done, I took matters into my own hands and with a friend and after 5 months of intensive work we became the founders and shareholders of MiraMira. As a sign of goodwill to the Ruach Foundation, they were given the \$10,000 which I had raised for the optician's shop for the Ruach Foundation's

programmes, with the help of the GlobalGiving platform. The shop opened in May 2021. Although MiraMira was now independent, the aim of the shop remained and was agreed with the Ruach Foundation that when MiraMira started to make profits (i.e. after the fairly high initial investment was recovered) MiraMira would transfer real profit to Ruach's social work.

After I was dismissed by the Ruach Board in Aug 2021, their attitude towards the glasses store did not improve and they became increasingly demanding: 'you have to keep your promise, where is our share of the profits'. By the time the term of the agreement expired, we had only cleared part of the debt, so MiraMira was never in a position to hand over a profit. Needless to say, the atmosphere between MiraMira and the Ruach Foundation had become toxic: the agreement was not renewed. After my dismissal my business partner and I kept MiraMira going, but as neither of us are business people, we decided in October 2023 to close the optician's shop, and were able to sell most of the shop's inventory.