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Searching for a Path: Evangelicals in Nicaraguan Politics

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Searching for a Path:
Evangelicals in Nicaraguan Politics

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Fall 2006

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Abstract:

Evangelicals now comprise approximately 20-25% of the Nicaraguan population, but the Nicaraguan political system has remained dominated by the specter of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, in the 1990s, some evangelical leaders, including ones who had previously been vocal opponents of political involvement, sought new outlets for political participation. I claim that the evangelical political movement has drawn on three justifications: a struggle against political marginalization, a crusade for "traditional moral values," and a fight for economic betterment.

Here, utilizing interviews with 18 Nicaraguan Protestants involved in Christian political or social movements, I trace evangelical political parties though the 1990s, focusing on the successes and failings of the *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Christian Path) party. I show that efforts to establish an evangelical political party have faltered for lack of transparent leadership, lack of a coherent plan of government, and lack of homogeneity within the evangelical community. I then examine the roles of evangelicals in the 2006 presidential campaign and conclude that future efforts by evangelicals to secure political power will likely operate within the structure of the major political parties.

En búsqueda de un Camino: Los evangélicos en la política nicaragüense

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Abstracto:

Actualmente, los evangélicos son aproximadamente 20-25% de la población nicaragüense, pero el sistema político Nicaragüense todavía está dominado por el espectro de la Iglesia Católica Romana. Como consecuencia, en los 90, algunos líderes evangélicos, incluyendo algunos que antes eran opositores fuertes de intervención en la política, buscaron nuevos canales para la participación político. Afirmo que el movimiento político evangélico ha recurrido a tres justificaciones: una lucha contra la marginalización política, una cruzada por los "valores morales tradicionales," y una batalla por la mejora económica.

Aquí, utilizando las entrevistas con 18 evangélicos nicaragüenses involucrados en movimientos cristianos políticos o sociales, examino partidos políticos evangélicos durante los 90, enfocando en los éxitos y las fallas del partido Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense. Demuestro que los esfuerzos para establecer un partido evangélico han fracasado por falta de liderazgo transparente, falta de un plan de gobierno coherente, y falta de homogeneidad entre la comunidad evangélica. Luego, yo examino los roles de los evangélicos en la campaña presidencial de 2006, y concluyo que los esfuerzos futuros de los evangélicos para ganar el poder político probablemente van a operar dentro de la estructura de los partidos políticos mayores.

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Introduction and Methodology

"For academics and journalists alike, the ordinary is just not interesting."—Phillip Jenkins[1]

Although as a Religious Studies major in the United States I've studied primarily Protestant Christianity, I came to Nicaragua having made the conscious choice to do a project that would somehow speak to the continuing influence of the Roman Catholic Church in that country. While Protestant Christianity has made certain advances in Nicaragua, Roman Catholicism—though not necessarily dogmatic Roman Catholicism--remains the dominant religious force in the country. I believe that, while the study of religious minorities is legitimate and valuable, scholars of Latin American religion should duly note historian Phillip Jenkins' warning in *The Next Christendom* that "the continuing power of the mainstream churches must be emphasized because many Westerners are understandably fascinated by the insurgent movements,"[2] and commit themselves to studying religious minorities in their contexts as religious minorities.

Although evangelicals[3] have made great inroads in Nicaragua, they remain a relatively small segment of the population. Evangelical congregations experienced rapid growth during the difficult times of the 1980s, but in the 1990s their numbers actually fell, and a 1998 study placed the percentage of baptized adult Protestants at only 12.2%.[4] Though evangelical congregations are again experiencing rapid growth, most scholars estimate that the percentage of the population that is evangelical remains somewhere between 20% and 25%.[5] Given the fact that most Nicaraguans are still

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[1] Jenkins, Phillip. *The Next Christendom.* 58.
[2] Ibid, 57. Ironically, Jenkins' own text focuses primarily on the growth of Pentecostalism and other "insurgent movements."
[3] In Spanish, "*evangélico*" typically refers to any non-Catholic Christian, and I use the term "evangelical" in this context. Although some Nicaraguan scholars prefer to translate "*evangélico*" as "Protestant," given the fact that evangelical in English generally carries a connotation of conservativism, I note that non-Catholic Christians in Nicaragua are overwhelmingly (religiously) conservative.
[4] INDEF, quoted in Zub, Roberto. *Protestantismo y participación politica en Nicaragua.* 17
[5] This, for instance, is the estimate of Dr. Benjamín Cortés (Personal Interview. November 20, 2006) , and

Roman Catholics, I came to Nicaragua determined to do a project relating to Roman Catholicism, which certainly remains a very rich subject for investigation here. I planned an independent study project relating the history of the conflict between the Catholic Church hierarchy and the revolutionary government by examining people's reactions to the Pope's visit to Managua in 1983. Without a doubt, the Pope's visit was a defining moment in the history of Catholicism in Nicaragua, and would have been an excellent lens for discussing Church-State relations.

However, contemporary events made me reconsider my decision to do an investigation about a papal visit that occurred more than two decades in the past. I came to Nicaragua in the Fall of 2006, during the height of a presidential campaign, and I soon became completely absorbed in contemporary Nicaraguan electoral politics. I was supposed to begin my investigation on Wednesday, November 8th, three days after Daniel Ortega recaptured the presidency. On the morning of that day, I sat at the base of the statue of Augusto Sandino perched high above the ruins of the Old City of Managua, trying to collect my thoughts and find some meaning in the electoral campaign that I had d been observing and discussing constantly for the two and a half months that I had lived in Nicaragua. I realized that there was no way I would be able to focus my efforts for a whole month on a project that did not directly relate to the contemporary political climate.

During the presidential campaign, I had been fascinated by the candidacy of Edén Pastora, a hero of the Sandinista insurrection who led the August 1978 raid on the National Palace. Pastora later became disillusioned with the revolutionary government, which he claimed had turned the Sandinista Revolution over "to the hands of the

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seems to be in line with estimates by most scholars, though there have not been any reliable statistical studies in recent years. Evangelical political leaders, on the other hand, tend to cite numbers between 30% and 40%, a strategy of overestimation that they've used to try to bolster their political influence. See Zub, Roberto. *Protestantismo y participación politica en Nicaragua.* 115.

Cubans and the Soviets," and in 1982 he fled to Costa Rica where he became a Contra leader.[6] An outspoken critic of Nicaraguan politicians on both the right and the left, Pastora ran a low budget campaign that relied mostly on his personal charisma and low-flying passes in an airplane over the city of Managua, during which Pastora would make comments over a loudspeaker such as "If you want zero corruption, vote for Edén."

My personal affinity for Pastora led me during the last days of the campaign to his campaign headquarters, which, not surprisingly given the party's small budget, was located in his modest house. Pastora, although himself a Catholic, was running as the candidate for *Alternativa por el Cambio* (Alternative for Change--AC)--formerly known as *Alternativa Cristiana*--an evangelical political party that had split off from the *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Christian Path--CCN) party. At the campaign headquarters, three of my fellow students and I spoke with a young pastor who was a candidate for deputy to the National Assembly. This little coalition of evangelicals and Edén supporters actually thought they were in position to obtain a large number of seats in the National Assembly.

In the end, Pastora only obtained 0.27% of the vote[7], and thus *Alternativa por el Cambio* ceased to exist as a political party.[8] Despite this, or perhaps because of this, I was fascinated by Edén and his little party, although I had little knowledge of its origin. Soon, I learned that *Alternativa por el Cambio* was one of several attempts to create an evangelical political party during the 16 years since the revolutionary government left power in 1990. I decided that I wanted to study evangelical political parties in the 1990s and 2000s, and to place them in the greater context of evangelical political involvement in Nicaragua.

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[6] See "Breve Biografía" in "Ahora Sí. El Cambio va con Edén." *Alternativa por el Cambio* campaign pamphlet.
[7] Supreme Electoral Council. http://www.cse.gov.ni
[8] In Nicaragua, a political party must obtain 4% of the popular vote in a national election to maintain its legal status.

My investigation was based primarily on 18 interviews with Nicaraguan Protestants, both clergy members and laypeople. Interviews were conducted in Managua, Nicaragua, over a two and a half week period in November of 2006. Almost all of my interviewees were or had been actively involved in Nicaraguan Christian political or social movements. Four were deputies or former-deputies to the Nicaraguan National Assembly. Five were *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense* party activists, while others were supporters of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front--FSLN) or the center-right *Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance--ALN). Still others had retreated from political involvement and returned to church work. A variety of denominations were represented, mostly Pentecostals of several different denominations but also Baptists and one Moravian. All interviews, except for the interview with Rev. Gustavo Parajón and the interview with Rev. Norman Bent, were conducted in Spanish. Most were recorded to tape and simultaneously transcribed in my work journal. I have tried to represent the words of my interviewees as faithfully as possible, in both the reporting and the translation.

My own investigation is marked by my double-outsider position on the topic. Not only am I not a member of the Nicaraguan evangelical community, but I am a non-Christian. Some of my informants (and indeed, some of my fellow students) appeared confused as to why a non-evangelical would want to study the evangelical political movement, although most appeared eager to assist me in my investigation. I reciprocated by investigating their movement with openness and without suspicion towards their goals. For instance, though I do not necessarily agree with the positions that many evangelicals have on some social issues, I view their campaign to preserve what they see as “traditional values” as legitimate political expression.

I remain somewhat wary about studying what has been a fractured political movement that has involved only certain sectors of what remains a minority group. Given this, I undertake my study with the understanding that the Nicaraguan evangelical political movement is defined precisely because of its context as a small political movement within a political system dominated by the specter of the Roman Catholic Church. While this investigation began as an effort to investigate the conversion of evangelical religious groups to evangelical political parties, it became clear that one of the trends in evangelical political participation is towards unity with the major parties. Therefore, my investigation examines both the successes and failures of the evangelical party movement and evangelical efforts to gain greater representation within the structures of the major political parties.

A Brief Background on Protestants in Nicaraguan Politics: 1936-1996

"The Protestant political movement is neither something of the right nor something of the left. It's something different."[9]—Rev. José Miguel Torres

Though several evangelicals reached positions of power within the Somoza government of 1936-1979, evangelicals in this period tended to shun direct political involvement. However, as the fight against the Somoza dictatorship began to take shape in the 1960s, a small group of evangelical university students, calling themselves the *Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano* (Christian Student Movement--MEC), took an active role in the revolutionary process, seeing it as "an opportunity to become involved in socio-political transformation."[10].

Rev. José Miguel Torres, a Baptist minister who played an active role within the MEC, explains that though the radical leftist leaders of the MEC did not have much in common ideologically with the conservative evangelical leaders of today, the MEC by

[9] Torres, José Miguel. Personal Interview. November 10, 2006.
[10] Bent, Norman. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.

their actions provided an example that led to political participation by other Protestants. Says Torres:

> "Thirty year ago, these evangelicals said they didn't participate in politics, because politics was bad, sinful. Today they (the conservative evangelicals) are legitimizing those proposals of ours that they had rejected in the past, which were rejected supposedly for ideas of faith, but actually for ideology and for lack of sociological comprehension."[11]

Thus, the MEC and the participation of leftist Protestants in the campaign against the Somoza dictatorship provided an inspiration for evangelical political participation in the future, despite radical differences in ideology.

It was in the 1970s that some Protestant churches and religious organizations began to seriously emphasize social works in addition to their mission of evangelization. After the 1972 earthquake that leveled most of the city of Managua, a group of Protestants joined together to create a relief organization known as the *Consejo Evangélico Pro-Ayuda Al Desarollo* (Evangelical Council for Aid for Development--CEPAD), an organization whose history mirrors the history of Protestant social involvement. In 1973, the Committee changed their focus from earthquake relief to rural development, and found itself working in the zones most affected by the guerilla war being waged against the dictatorship by the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*.

After the Sandinista government came to power, says Rev. Norman Bent, "the role of the historical Protestant churches was one of 'questionable participation.' They were on the edge of things watching, supporting but critical."[12] On the other hand, more conservative evangelicals, such as most Pentecostals "were on the edge of the fence," claims Bent. "They would go where the wind blew best. They supported the Revolution if favors were given to them."[13] Although there were noted confrontations between the Sandinista government and some conservative evangelical leaders who

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[11] Torres, José Miguel. Personal Interview. November 22, 2006.
[12] Bent, Norman. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.
[13] Ibid

were particularly fiercely anti-Communist in their rhetoric, the Sandinista government did not demonstrate any particular hostility to the evangelical community as a whole, and some evangelicals participated within the revolutionary process. Indeed, according to a 1992 study by Roberto Zub, only 17.3% of evangelicals viewed relations between the FSLN and evangelicals as "bad," while 41.2% viewed relations between the FSLN and evangelicals as either "excellent" or "good."[14]

The new political climate following the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 opened the way for several early Protestant political efforts. Evangelicals who had sympathized with the Sandinista revolution created the *Partido de Justicia Nacional* (National Justice Party--PJN) in 1991 and the *Moviminto Evangélico Popular* (Popular Evangelical Movement--MEP) in 1992, but neither party would ever see any deputies elected to the National Assembly, causing one *Camino Cristiano* activist to remark with regards to the other attempts to create evangelical parties that "the quantity of letters is greater than the quantity of people that they had."[15] Though these parties were among the handful of attempts to create a Protestant political party of a Social-Christian trajectory, none of these efforts were able to gain a significant following.

Roots of Evangelical Political Participation

"If we really believe in the Word, we have to bring it out and we have to do something about it."—Delia Arellano, evangelical National Assembly deputy[16]

The traditional shunning of political involvement by evangelicals has generally been viewed by scholars as in line with Protestant theological assumptions. As Christian Smith and Liesl Hath note:

> "One of the reasons given for evangelicalism's rejection of political activism is that it locates the roots of social transformation in the personal salvation of individuals. Whereas liberation theology sees oppressive social structures as perpetuating sin, and therefore focuses immediate attention on structural

[14] Zub, Roberto. "Los evangélicos son cada vez más políticos." *Envío*. Managua, November 1992.
[15] Sarria, Francisco. Personal Interview. November 21, 2006.
[16] Arellano, Delia. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.

> transformation, evangelicals are viewed as believing that structures will be transformed only when the people who inhabit them are transformed."[17]

Without a doubt, apoliticism can easily be justified within Protestant theology and its focus on the individual, and before the 1990s most conservative evangelicals shunned direct political involvement.

In the Nicaraguan context, missionaries from the United States were particularly influential in the traditional attitudes of evangelicals towards political participation. "Most of the missionaries," says Rev. Parajón, CEPAD founder, "taught that it was a sin to participate in political affairs and political life, and perhaps still the great majority of the people feel it isn't possible for evangelicals to participate."[18] Indeed, my conversations with lay evangelicals in Nicaragua suggest that while most believe that is acceptable for evangelicals to vote, there is still a great distrust of active participation. This attitude is summed up in the words of one Assemblies of God member, who told me that "a man who is right with the path of God doesn't need to meddle in politics."[19]

During the past decade, however, a sector of conservative evangelical leaders, some of whom were previously among the most vocal critics of political participation, have turned to direct political involvement. As Roberto Zub writes:

> "The fundamentalists--who emerged as a position of force against modern anthropological and social theory—argued for a rejection of the world. However, decades afterwards their successors proclaimed an integration into its structures of power. Those dogmatic stretches and their critique of modernism now were navigating in the waters of post-modernity."[20]

Many evangelicals realized that active participation in politics was necessary to preserve the rights of the evangelical community. Specifically, evangelical politicians

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[17] Smith and Haas, "Revolutionary Evangelicals in Nicaragua: Political Opportunity, Class Interests, and Religious Identity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1997:36, 441.

[18] Parajón, Gustavo. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006. The apolitical attitude is also attributed to this interference by North American missionaries by some evangelicals on the Right, marking one of the few situations in my research in which right-wing evangelicals would openly criticize the influence of the United States.

[19] Hernandez, Alan. Personal Interview. November 13, 2006.

[20] Zub, Roberto. *Protestantismo y Participación Política en Nicaragua*, 8.

justified their participation as necessary to combat political marginalization, as a campaign in favor of traditional moral values, and as a fight for economic betterment.

Political Marginalization:

Although since José Santos Zelaya's constitutional reform of 1893 Nicaragua has officially been a "lay state" (that is, a country without an official religion), evangelicals have long complained that Roman Catholicism remains the de facto state religion. As Pastor Omar Duarte--a televangelist who launched the *Movimiento de Unidad Cristiana* (Christian Unity Movement--MUC)[21] party in 2001 under the banner of preservation of the lay state--claims, "Although it says in the Constitution in Article 14 that the state doesn't have an official religion, by their actions the state benefits one religion, and not the other sectors."[22]

After Violeta Barrios de Chamorro succeeded Daniel Ortega as president, following the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990, the new government made open gestures to mend relations with the Catholic Church hierarchy, a relationship which had been significantly damaged during the 1980s. Roberto Zub identifies four examples of what was seen as political favoritism towards the Roman Catholic Church during the Chamorro government: the gift of land and buildings for the creation of the *Universidad Católica*, the collaboration with the construction of the new cathedral in Managua, use of lottery proceeds to support church programs, and the "scandalous investment in infrastructure" that preceded the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1996.[23]

Evangelical political efforts have combated the financial benefits that were granted to the Catholic Church, or, rather, have worked to secure the same financial

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[21] The MUC had difficulty securing legal status from the Supreme Electoral Council, something that Duarte blames on CCN leader Rev. Osorno's influence over the members of the Council. As a result, the MUC never mounted an independent political campaign, but instead entered the 2001 race (and again in 2006) in alliance with the *Frente Sandinista.*

[22] Duarte, Omar. Personal Interview. November 28, 2006.

[23] Zub, Roberto, *Protestantism y participación política en Nicaragua*, 56.

benefits for evangelical churches. Most notably, politicians from the *Camino Cristiano* party have secured tax-exempt status for all churches, a benefit that was previously only granted to the Roman Catholic Church.

Critics of these efforts claim that in their desire to secure political power for their community and prevent preferential treatment towards the Roman Catholic Church, evangelical politicians have themselves violated the principles of separation of church and state. "Pastors need to be evangelized in what is the lay state," comments Sixto Ulloa, a Baptist layperson who was a deputy to the National Assembly during the Sandinista government.[24] Ulloa complains that instead of opposing abuses of separation of church and state that favor the Roman Catholic Church, evangelical politicians have simply sought comparable benefits for their own churches. Ulloa mentions as an example that Bible societies have demanded tens of thousands of dollars from the city of Managua for their Bible Day celebrations, because of the fact that the municipality gives money to the Roman Catholic Church for the patron saint festivals. Evangelical leaders reject the claim that this constitutes a violation of the lay state, claiming they are seeking only parity for all religious organizations.

Zub claims that it was both the open support of the Roman Catholic Church and the neglect of the interests of evangelicals that paved the way for evangelicals to seek representation by means of evangelical political parties. "Nothing was more useful for the legitimization and acceptation of Pastor Osorno (founder of the *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense* party)," he writes, "than the context of the exclusion of evangelicals during the Chamorro government."[25] Francisco Sarria, *Camino Cristiano* deputy, says it was precisely this political marginalization--the feeling that evangelicals were treated

[24] Ulloa, Sixto. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.
[25] Zub, Roberto, *Protestantism y participación política en Nicaragua*, 72.

as “third-class, or lower, citizens, who didn’t have the right to anything”[26]--that led to the creation of the CCN. He even goes as far as to say that before the CCN brought evangelicals representation in the National Assembly, “the official religion *was* Catholicism.”[27]

Osorno himself, while not going as far as claiming that Catholicism occupied the position of state religion, does note that “in Nicaragua, as in all of Latin America, the role of the Catholic Church has been like that of a political party, except one that interferes in all the other political parties.”[28] Indeed, the ability of the Roman Catholic Church to influence politicians in Nicaragua has been remarkable, and critics on both the right and left have been quick to criticize the Church for its interference in political campaigns.

In addition to efforts to eliminate the special privileges granted to the Roman Catholic Church and the interference of the Church in the political system, evangelical politicians have responded to what they’ve seen as political attacks against the evangelical people. Most recently, in 2005, evangelical politicians organized opposition to an amendment introduced to an environmental bill to ban excessively loudly amplified church services, an amendment that they saw as a direct attack on the evangelical community, introduced by “a legislator who doesn’t like evangelical people,” says Sarria.[29] Evangelical politicians have taken it upon themselves to combat what they see as systematic bias against evangelical churches and discrimination against evangelical people.

Campaign for Conservative Social Values:

[26] Sarria, Francisco. Personal Interview. November 21, 2006.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.
[29] Sarria, Francisco. Personal Interview. November 21, 2006.

In the United States, evangelicals generally justify political participation as a fight to preserve traditional values against an invasion by the corrupting forces of what evangelical leader Tim LaHaye terms "Secular Humanism."[30] For these North American evangelicals, political involvement is first and foremost a moral crusade. While the evangelical political movement in Nicaragua arose principally as a fight for political representation, there is a socially conservative aspect to the Nicaraguan political movement, as well.

The moral component of the political fight of evangelicals was at its most visible in the Fall of 2006, when the National Assembly considered legislation to modify the Nicaraguan Constitution to penalize all types of abortion, including cases where the mother's life is at risk. Evangelicals rallied with Catholic leaders (a rare, perhaps unprecedented case of cooperation between conservative evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church) to orchestrate a campaign in favor of the constitutional amendment. In the end, evangelical leaders rallied 20,000 evangelicals to join in a march along with 50,000 Catholics in support of the legislation, [31] and the National Assembly passed the amendment by a vote of 52-0.[32]

Although many evangelicals who ally themselves with the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* hold conservative positions on social issues and participated, for instance, in the anti-abortion campaign, for some far-right evangelicals, including many of the leaders of CCN[33], the moral mission of evangelicals in politics is intimately tied

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[30] LaHaye defines the five pillars of Seecular Humanism to be "atheism, evolution, amorality, autonomous man, and the socialist one-world view." See Shuck, Glenn W., *Marks of the Beast: The LeftBehind Novels and the Search for Evangelical Identity*, 67 for a further discussion of LaHaye's *The Battle for the Mind.*.

[31] Llana, Sara Miller. "Evangelicals flex growing clout in Nicaragua's election." *Christian Science Monitor*, November 2, 2006.

[32] Aleman, Filadelfo. "Nicaraguan Lawmakers Vote to Ban Abortions." *Washington Post*. October 26, 2006.

[33] Ironically, CCN president Rev. Guillermo Osorno claims that Daniel Ortega invited him to be his running mate in the 2006 election, a story that is frequently repeated by CCN loyalists. Osorno's assertion that he turned Ortega down because of moral abhorrence of the FSLN is intended to validate his

to active opposition to the *Frente*. Karla Carcache, the CCN vice-president, explains the evangelicals' opposition to the FSLN in a form that echoes the strong anti-communist rhetoric that characterized conservative Nicaraguan evangelicals in the 1980s. "For us," says Carcache, "the *Frente* speaks of many things that go against the word of God, like Communism and Marxism." In other words, the *Frente Sandinista* is seen as a Marxist-atheist threat to Christianity and Christian values.

The CCN leadership took Daniel Ortega's victory in the 2006 presidential campaign very seriously. For weeks after the election, reports Carcache, the leadership met from four to six in the morning, Monday through Friday, "asking God to take away the pain and give vision for the future."[34] Opposition to the FSLN centers on two points. The first is the belief that the FSLN's philosophy is based on atheism and not on Christian values, and thus that the FSLN by its very nature promotes immorality. As Luis Espinoza, a CCN youth activist, explains, "the *Frente Sandinista* is a party that sanctions social liberty, which implies things like homosexual marriage. They're going to create a disaster."[35] One needs only to explains the dangerous implications of the FSLN's philosophies to evangelicals, says Espinoza, in order to steer them away from the *Frente*.

The second aspect of the opposition to the *Frente* is based on the historical distrust that has existed between the FSLN and conservative evangelical churches since the time of the Revolution. Although Ortega based his campaign platform on the principles of "peace and reconciliation," a number of the most conservative evangelicals did not consider his attempt to seek reconciliation to be sincere and do not believe that

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claim that he is politician with principle. FSLN supporters are very skeptical of this story, and there is no evidence that it actually happened. However, it is also not completely implausible, as Ortega's ultimate running mate, Jaime Morales--a onetime member of the directorate of the Contra--is himself a former archenemy of the *Frente*.

[34] Carcache, Karla. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.

[35] Espinoza, Luis. Personal Interview. November 22, 2006.

Ortega and the FSLN leadership have changed what these conservative evangelicals perceive to be a position of hostility towards the evangelical people. As CCN deputy Francisco Sarria explained, "People say, 'I changed after that operation. I changed after the death of my son,' but Daniel hasn't said why he's going to change. We've already had bad experiences with him, and we haven't seen the reason why he's going to change."[36] Within the framework of the evangelical conversion experience, a dramatic change in behavior is always precipitated by some sort of dramatic, life-altering experience. Absent such an experience, this group of right-wing evangelicals, who believe they were actively persecuted during the 1980s, are certain that the new Ortega government will adopt the same attitude towards them that the first Sandinista government had.

Search for Economic Betterment:

Roger Lancaster notes that, although there are evangelicals in every social class, "unlike the Protestantism of the Reformation, Protestantism in Nicaragua has been most emphatically a religion not only of the poor generally, but more specifically of the most marginalized poor, especially those living in urban slums."[37] Given the fact that many evangelicals occupy the lowest social classes, the evangelical community feels that it has a special obligation to fight for economic improvement. Although evangelicals could be expected to simply withdraw from the world, the members of the evangelical political movement have taken an active option for economic empowerment. As Pastor Jairo Andino, who preaches in one particularly poor neighborhood in Managua explains, "Christ could come today, or he could come in 1,000 years, and we have to take care of our members in the meantime. Be ready for him today or in 1,000 years,

[36] Sarria, Francisco. Personal Interview. November 21, 2006.
[37] Lancaster, Roger, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 110.

but there are needs right now."[38] Even Andino, a conservative CCN activist, defines the economic betterment of the evangelical people as central to the evangelical political mission.

It has been noted that the influence placed on the individual in Protestant theology tends to make evangelical politicians more apt to focus on individual solutions to social problems and leaves them unwilling to combat problematic social structures. However, the experience of evangelicals in Nicaragua within the FSLN, both during the time of the Revolution and during the contemporary period, suggests that some evangelicals, even some religiously conservative evangelicals, do adopt progressive, even revolutionary strategies to combat economic inequality. As Christian Smith and Liesl Haas claim:

> "Given specific social and political conditions, Latin American evangelicals' political attitudes and behaviors can express themselves in a variety of political directions. The often dramatic transformations occurring in the personal behavior of converts to evangelicalism do not necessarily translate into a predictable, much less apolitical or right-wing position on political issues…If a revolutionary government—such as Allende's in Chile or the Sandinistas' in Nicaragua—can tap into the class consciousness of poor Protestants, Latin American evangelicals will in effect figure out a way to justify their political action in terms of their faith."[39]

Thus, not only have Nicaraguan evangelical politicians rallied forces behind a call to economic improvement, these efforts have spanned the political spectrum, from development-based models to calls for radical social reform.

The Tsunami: *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense*

"That wasn't an earthquake; it was a tsunami: That one could create an evangelical party, like the one we had contrived."—Delia Arellano, former CCN deputy[40]

"There are few that believe in *Camino Cristiano*, or better stated, that believe in Guillermo Osorno. The Bible tells us that the little foxes ruin vintners, and so it was with *Camino Cristiano*."—Pastor Josué Sierra[41]

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[38] Andino, Jairo. Personal Interview. November 22, 2006.
[39] Smith and Haas, "Revolutionary Evangelicals in Nicaragua: Political Opportunity, Class Interests, and Religious Identity," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1997:36, 451-452.
[40] Arellano, Delia. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.

Karla Carcache, vice-president of *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense*, which arose as an evangelical political party during the 1996 national election campaign, notes that in considering motives for evangelical political participation, one must consider first that "we as evangelicals always believe that God directs our lives." Carcache herself claims that God spoke to her in Miami, at a conference of the North American prophetic evangelist Cindy Jacobs. God spoke through Jacobs, she says, telling her that "he was taking me to another level, so that I wasn't going to be confined to the four walls of the church anymore."[42] When the opportunity came to act out the prophecy through participation in an evangelical party, Carcache joined the CCN leadership.

The founders of *Camino Cristiano*, in keeping with the Pentecostal tradition to which most of them belong[43], frequently claim in this manner that God has intervened directly in their lives to lead them to become involved in politics. For instance, Rev. Guillermo Osorno, president of the party and the party's presidential candidate in the 1996, has claimed, "God spoke in my life at a world congress in Jerusalem, in Israel, about participating in the field of politics,"[44] a divine revelation that gains added credibility by being placed physically in the Holy Land. Revelation has become an important element of the political discourse of the CCN, used to justify their reversal from a position of apoliticism. In this context, the about-face in terms of attitude towards politics is not viewed by the CCN leadership as an inconsistency. Instead, God's call to political participation mirrors a profound conversion experience.

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[41] Sierra, Josué. Personal Interview. November 27, 2006. The allusion here is to Song of Solomon 2:15: "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom" (NIV).
[42] Carcache, Karla. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.
[43] CCN's use of the discourse of divine revelation does seem to be tailored towards to a Pentecostal audience. Gustavo Parajón, the founding director of CEPAD, goes so far as to claim that when Osorno came to address the organization during the 1996 campaign, "he never told me or CEPAD that he had a revelation." (Personal Interview, November 24, 2006) Thus, while Osorno and the CCN continue to use direct intervention of God as a justification for involvement when conversing with their faithful, they may also recognize that such language may be viewed skeptically by non-Pentecostals.
[44] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.

In explaining the necessity for Christian leaders to become politicians, Osorno frequently points to corruption among existing politicians. "We've given power to corrupt governments of thieves and rapists[45], destroyers of our own people," says Osorno, "and they've won because of our vote, the vote of the Christians."[46] Only Christian politicians will have the moral grounding to follow the example of Jesus, who "came not to be served but to serve."[47] Members of the church must participate directly in the field of politics, says Osorno, not in the same manner as existing politicians, but rather by "living the difference that we're light, and shining."[48] Osorno continues to use the principle of the Church as light to explain why Christians need to occupy high positions in the government. "Lights are never placed underneath the tables. They've placed high up," he says. "If we're light, we need to be in the most important places, the ones that the secular world thinks are the most important."[49]

Although the results of the 1996 election did not fulfill Osorno's prophecy that he would become the next president of Nicaragua, *Camino Cristiano* was widely considered to be the electoral surprise of that year, emerging from nowhere to become the third-place finisher out of the 23 parties that appeared on the ballot. While Osorno only received 72,621 votes (4.3% of the votes cast), the CCN became a legitimate political force, with four deputies elected to the National Assembly.[50] More importantly, says Osorno, the CCN leaders also gained an understanding of what was necessary for a successful electoral campaign. "You have to recognize that I was an inexperienced politician," notes Osorno. "I didn't know anything. I was sure that I was

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[45] Presumably a reference to Daniel Ortega, who has been accused of molesting his stepdaughter.
[46] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.
[47] See Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28
[48] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Zub, Roberto. *Protestantismo y participación política en Nicaragua.* 73-74.

going to win the presidency, but God didn't give the presidency to me, but rather knowledge."[51]

With the representatives in the National Assembly, CCN was able to secure financial equity between evangelical churches and the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, Osorno was able to negotiate what he terms "political favors,"[52] including scholarships for evangelical students. These political accomplishments, however, were marred by the close association between Osorno and former-president Arnoldo Alemán, whose government was marked by the embezzlement of at least US$100,000,000.[53] "When the corruption was shown to be true in the Alemán administration, he never condemned it. So I have to conclude he was only interested in his own power,"[54] notes Rev. Gustavo Parajón. Though CCN had presented itself as "a moral reserve of men with morals and values,"[55] Osorno was widely disgraced, to the extent that he was referred to popularly as "Rev. *Soborno*" (bribe). Among most sectors of the evangelical community (and indeed throughout most of Nicaraguan society), Osorno seems to be viewed as, in the words of one lay evangelical, someone "not concerned for the well-being of his people, but rather only for his own power."[56]

Indeed, Nicaraguan evangelical politicians have not been able to avoid corruption or the appearance of corruption. Though evangelical politicians launched themselves as an alternative to the corruption of secular politicians, Dr. Benjamín Cortés remarks that "it'd be almost impossible to have an evangelical party in

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[51] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.
[52] Ibid.
[53] This is the figure cited by Robin Hodess in Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report 2004*, in which that organization names Alemán as the 9th most corrupt president of all time.
[54] Parajón, Gustavo. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.
[55] Andino, Jairo. Personal Interview. November 22, 2006.
[56] Sequiera, Roberto. Personal Interview. November 11, 2006.

Nicaragua," because "you can count on your fingers the number of evangelical leaders that have demonstrated honesty and transparent results." [57]

Furthermore, Osorno and the CCN were never able to present anything that amounted to a comprehensive plan of governance. Former CCN member Delia Arellano, reflecting on the lack of a coherent plan, recalls that "the ideology in this time remained a little bit behind. We were more in it for principles than ideology."[58] As a result, many evangelicals did not see the CCN as a legitimate political option. Rev. Parajón recalls that the CEPAD "asked him (Osorno) what his Plan of Government was in a conference we had. He never said anything. He said he couldn't because the others would come and copy him. Jesus says, 'by their fruits you shall know.'"[59] Though the novelty of an evangelical political party was enough for Osorno to gain a small number of votes in 1996 and some of those voters would be likely to vote for CCN in the future for the same reason, it is unlikely that CCN could ever gain more than a handful of deputies on the basis of that vote alone.

CCN also faltered because it assumed that the evangelical community was ideologically similar enough that all evangelicals would unite behind one political party. No one political party, it seems, can attract every Nicaraguan evangelical, because Nicaraguan evangelicals are found along all parts of the political spectrum. As Dr. Benjamín Cortés notes, "All the evangelical parties that pretended to have backing in the whole evangelical community have fractured."[60] Evangelicals in Nicaragua do not form a homogeneous voting block. Pastor Josué Sierra speaks of the danger of an organization believing that it has the right to speak for the whole evangelical community, claiming that "the only one that can represent the evangelicals is the

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[57] Cortés, Benjamín. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.
[58] Arellano, Delia. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.
[59] Parajón, Gustavo. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006. A reference to the "false prophets" of Matthew 7:15-20
[60] Cortés, Benjamín. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.

Alianza Evangélica Nicaragüense, and that's in religious matters."[61] The experience of the evangelical political parties of the 1990s does not suggest that both evangelicals who have traditionally voted for the FSLN and evangelicals who have traditionally voted for parties of the Right would be willing to unite together solely on the basis of their shared religious affiliation.

As a result, the CCN has found itself in a precarious political position, choosing to run within the alliance of Alemán's *Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (Liberal Constitutionalist Party--PLC) in the 2001 and 2006 political elections. In the words of one critic, the CCN is "dead and they aren't going to be resurrected….They don't gave a social or political base, nor do they have credibility."[62] Though Osorno himself remains a powerful deputy in the National Assembly and still carries a great deal of sway within the PLC itself, the CCN as a party has very little popular support.

The 2006 Elections

During their victorious 2006 campaign, the FSLN made an unprecedented effort to tap into a wider sector of evangelical voters. As Sixto Ulloa, the former deputy, explains it:

> "The *Frente Sandinista* has always had a sector of evangelicals of the Left, but the *Frente* already knows that these are with them. Below there is a great evangelical sector of the Right, that's in favor of the United States, of the war in Iraq, and that thinks that Israel is God's people, all of this North American politics. Now the leftist leaders have gone in to court that sector."[63]

In the 2006 campaign, the FSLN was able to make new inroads in sectors of the evangelical community that viewed the *Frente* suspiciously in the past. Ortega's coalition in the 2006 electoral campaign, which he called "*Unida, Nicaragua Triunfa*" (United, Nicaragua Triumphs), incorporated not only Sandinistas but also prominent

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[61] Sierra, Josué. Personal Interview. November 27, 2006. The *Alianza Evangélica Nicaragüense* is a interdenominational federation that claims to represent 80% of the Nicaraguan evangelical population within its member organizations.
[62] Ulloa, Sixto. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.
[63] Ibid.

former Contras and the Miskito-led YATAMA party.[64] The campaign rhetoric of Ortega consistently emphasized that the FSLN coalition was one of reconciliation, a tactic that proved very appealing to some evangelical voters. In promoting a theme of reconciliation, says Rev. Nestalí Cortez, Ortega was supporting a decidedly Christian value. "We found it very appropriate, as Christians" he says, "to support a government of reconciliation, instead of the same confrontation."[65]

The *Frente* made specific efforts to convince evangelicals that an Ortega government would seek better relations with the evangelical community. As David Álvarez explains, "In reality, what existed (during the 1980s) was bad relations between the *Frente* and the leadership, because of the lack of a good channel of communication. There was never a forum for them to interact."[66] For this reason, the FSLN proposed the creation of a *Ministerio de Asuntos Religiosos* (Ministry of Religious Affairs), in which 50% of the positions would go to evangelicals, to provide a mechanism for interaction between the government and the churches.

In addition, many evangelicals were no-doubt attracted to the FSLN for the same reason as other Nicaraguans, a promise of reduced unemployment and increased social services. "We encountered in their Plan of Government," says Cortez, "a profound commitment to combat poverty."[67] Therefore, evangelicals voted not only out of their interests as an evangelical block but also as citizens of Nicaragua, some of whom were attracted to the FSLN for reasons other than specific promises made to the evangelical community.

Eduardo Montealegre, candidate for the center-right *Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Liberal Aliance), an emergent party filled mostly by former

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[64] The Miskitos, an indigenous group from the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, were in general one of the most resistant groups to the revolutionary government.
[65] Cortez, Nefteli. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.
[66] Álvarez, David. November 27, 2006.
[67] Cortez, Nefteli. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.

PLC members, also made a special effort to court evangelical voters. He recruited Delia Arellano, a deputy in the National Assembly and former CCN leader, to his alliance and organized what was called the *Coalición Evangélica* (Evangelical Coalition), a committee headed by Arellano and four evangelical pastors who marketed Montealegre and the ALN to the evangelical community. For the members of the *Coalición*, Montealegre's efforts represented a sincere effort to provide evangelicals a place within his campaign. "It wasn't a campaign solely manipulated by the ALN," notes Pastor Josué Sierra, one of members of the *Coalición*'s directorate, "but rather it was a campaign between the *Coalición* and the ALN, and that gave it credibility….I don't think he did it to be a politician. I think he had it in his heart to do it."[68] Montealegre also promised to create a *Secretaria de Relaciones Eclesiásticas* (Department of Ecclesiastical Relations), and promised to appoint qualified evangelicals to a variety of positions within his government, in an effort to court the evangelical vote.[69]

Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense remained out of the public profile, causing one critic, Rev. Norman Bent of the Moravian Church, to remark that CCN is "practically nonexistent," and that "it only exists in the minds of some people," namely, its leaders.[70] In the 2006 campaign, CCN once again ran within the alliance of the PLC, but even its influence within that alliance was further weakened, as Rev. Osorno was the only CCN candidate elected to the new term of the National Assembly.

Alternativa por el Cambio, under the leadership of former CCN deputy Orlando Tardencilla, splintered from *Camino Cristiano* during the 2004 municipal elections. Though the AC originally intended to run in alliance during the 2006 elections with the dissident Sandinista party, the *Movimiento Renovador Sandinista* (Sandinista Renewal

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[68] Sierra, Josué. November 27, 2006.
[69] *Coalición Evangélica*, "Acuerdo con Eduardo Montealegre," Managua, October 2, 2006.
[70] Bent, Norman. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.

Movement), they ultimately opted to run their own campaign, nominating Pastora, the revolutionary hero turned Contra, as their candidate.[71]

Although Pastora is well-respected by most Nicaraguans, he proved to have little appeal as a candidate, especially for evangelicals, with whom he had very little in common on social issues. During the time in which the evangelical community was rallying behind the campaign to ban all forms of abortion, Pastora was making comments to the press such as "for the people of Nicaragua, abortion isn't a social problem, just as the lesbians and gays aren't a social problem. Politicians are responsible for resolving social problems. Therapeutic abortion is a matter of conscience, and I as a politician never meddle in matters of conscience."[72] Thus, the selection of Pastora squandered whatever socially conservative base the AC could have hoped to have courted.

In addition to the lack of a coherent campaign message, the AC also suffered from a lack of financial backing. According to campaign-watch group *Red Ciudadanía por la Transparencia* (Citizens Network for Transparency), the AC spent C$6.9 million (approximately US$385,000) on their electoral campaign, compared to the C$107.4 million (approximately US$6,000,000) spent by the victorious *Frente Sandinista*.[73] The fact that the AC's low-budget campaign was only able to attract 0.27% of the presidential vote confirms that an evangelical party cannot expect to automatically be able to rely on the support of evangelical community, absent a well-orchestrated campaign. Furthermore, a well-orchestrated campaign requires substantial financing backing. Karla Carcache, the CCN vice-president, claimed that that party has estimated that they would need a minimum of US$5,000,000 to US$6,000,000 just to run a

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[71] Loáisiga López, Ludwin. "Ruptura sacude alianza de Lewites." *La Prensa*. March 17, 2006.
[72] Huerta, Juan Ramón. "Las que apoyan el aborto terapéutico no han salido embarazadas." *El Nuevo Diario*, September 3, 2006.
[73] Cerda, Arlen. "Gastan más que US$17 millones en campaña." *La Prensa*, October 31, 2006.

"good" campaign.[74] Given this, CCN's decision to maintain a low profile during the 2006 campaign, remaining in alliance with the PLC and waiting for the next election cycle in hopes of being able to mount a more serious effort then, seems to have been the wisest of its limited options. As Francisco Sarria, who remained in the National Assembly as Guillermo Osorno's substitute[75], explains, "We went in alliance with the PLC, and we survived, with deputies in the National Assembly and everything."[76] Though the CCN was further weakened as a party, it at the very least was able to maintain its legal status.

Perspectives on the Future of Evangelical Political Involvement

"One can't govern while discounting the enormous potential that we have."—Pastor Mauricio Orúe[77]

Although the current political situation makes the possibility of a serious campaign by an evangelical political party seem remote, the CCN leadership expresses optimism that evangelicals will choose to unite behind one political party. Recalling the ecumenism reflected in the campaign against therapeutic abortion, Pastor Jairo Andino, a grassroots CCN activist, claims that "if we can unite with the Catholics over the abortion law, we think that God can convince us to unite amongst ourselves (as evangelicals)."[78]

Rev. Osorno still believes that he will reach the presidency, the office that he believes God told him he would capture in 1996. "I have faith in God," he says. "The moment is going to arrive in which the evangelicals are going to mature more and have better levels of reflection, and we're going to see what has been promised."[79] Even Osorno, however, while not appearing to be backing off from his own political

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[74] Carache, Karla. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.
[75] In the Nicaraguan National Assembly, each deputy has a *suplente*, or substitute, who has voting rights if the primary deputy is unavailable. Thus, although CCN only won the one seat in the National Assembly, they technically do have (two) "deputies," as Sarria says.
[76] Sarria, Francisco. Personal Interview. November 21, 2006.
[77] Orúe, Mauricio. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.
[78] Andino, Jairo. Personal Interview. November 22, 2006.
[79] Osorno, Guillermo. Personal Interview. November 16, 2006.

aspirations, seems resigned to the fact that CCN may have to consider modifying its political structure in order to continue their fight. "We'll have a political party," assures Osorno, "whether it's called or not called 'Christian,' but (we'll have) one that is of our line and defends the interest of the nation and the evangelical people."[80]

Outside of *Camino Cristiano*, the general movement is away from the idea of evangelical political parties, and towards nonpartisan evangelical political organizations. "In the United States," notes Pastor Sierra, the *Coalición Evangélica* activist, "there isn't a Christian party, but there are coalitions and organization that coordinate the campaigns of chosen candidates."[81] In this spirit, he says, "the *Coalición Evangélica* should focus in promoting individual candidates for the municipal councils and for the mayorships."[82] Rev. Mauricio Orué echoes this call for churches and church organizations to support their members by means of "indirect participation." It will be "a lay evangelical, with the capacity and a true political charisma,"[83] that will be able to run a successful campaign. The assumption is that once well-qualified evangelicals hold offices in the municipal and national governments, they will be able to use their positions of power to serve the evangelical community. In the coming five years, the evangelical community will work to build leadership among lay evangelicals, focusing on those communities in which the numbers of evangelicals are highest. Evangelicals, notes Delia Arellano, the deputy and former CCN leader, already have a well-established organizational structure of which they can take advantage. Arellano speaks of the necessity of organizing to capacitate future evangelical leaders, but notes that "we already have the structure" to do this, in the form of the existing religious community.[84]

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Sierra, Josué. Personal Interview. November 27, 2006.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Orúe, Mauricio. Personal Interview. November 24, 2006.
[84] Arellano, Delia. Personal Interview. November 23, 2006.

Regardless of whether or not evangelicals will unite behind one single evangelical party, future political candidates of whatever orientation cannot ignore the effect that the evangelical minority can have on an electoral campaign. As Dr. Benjamín Cortés notes, "in a small country, having 1.5 million Protestants is a factor that can be decisive in the electoral process."[85] After years of being discounted as a political force, the power of the evangelical vote is finally being recognized. Future political campaigns will no doubt continue to attempt to build strong relationships with the evangelical community, in an effort to court the votes of the growing number of Nicaraguan evangelicals.

[85] Cortés, Benjamín. Personal Interview. November 20, 2006.

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