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Nicaraguan exile Francisco Alvicio, right, a deacon of Nicaragua's Moravian Church, prays in his rented room alongside fellow exile and Miskito leader Salomon Martinez Ocampo in San Jose, Costa Rica, Sunday, Sept. 22, 2024. (AP/Carlos Herrera)

MarÃa Teresa HernÃ;ndez

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When their church no longer felt safe, deacon Francisco Alvicio and his congregation made a plan. Cautiously, discreetly, they took their worship to their homes.

“If I’m pursued at the church, I still have my Bible,” the 63-year-old Nicaraguan said.

Praying in hiding became his last resort before [fleeing his country](#) in 2023.

Like him, several evangelical pastors, [Catholic priests](#) and [human rights organizations](#) have denounced the surveillance, harassment and the [imprisonment of Nicaraguan faith leaders](#) in recent years.

“Arriving with a weapon is not kind-hearted,” Alvicio said from Costa Rica, where he currently lives. “If someone goes into a church wearing a uniform, speaking loudly, it’s to intimidate.”

The relationship between Nicaraguan religious communities and the government [has been strained](#) since [President Daniel Ortega’s](#) crackdown on massive street protests in 2018.

Ortega [asked the Catholic Church to play a role as a mediator](#) when political tensions arose, but the [dialogue didn’t last long](#). After priests sheltered demonstrators inside their parishes and expressed concern about excessive use of force, Ortega [targeted them as “terrorists”](#) who backed opposition efforts to overthrow him.

Among evangelicals, relatively few pastors have openly supported the president. Most congregations have refrained from any political participation, though this has not prevented leaders from being imprisoned and hundreds of organizations from being closed.

In northern Nicaragua, where Alvicio was born, most of the Indigenous Miskito people are evangelicals. The Moravian Church – to which the deacon belonged – was established in Nicaragua in 1894. Until [its closure alongside more than 1,600 nongovernmental](#) organizations last August, it had about 350,000 members in the country.

For decades, Alvicio said, the Miskitos could profess their faith freely. Services took place every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Elders and children alike gathered at

the church, where clergy read the Bible and ceremonies ended by singing a Miskito hymn.

Things started shifting when the government imposed new rules on the congregation. First came a tax that its members had never paid. Then, an order to replace their logo.

“We did not accept,” Alvicio said. “We can’t change something just because the government wants to. The only path we follow is the one of God.”

Before long, black-clad strangers started showing up at his church.

Those too afraid to attend a public service decided to pray at home. Some read their Bibles in solitude. Others with spare chairs turned their tiny houses into makeshift churches, calling in a few neighbors and leaders like Alvicio.

By changing venues every day, lowering their voices and gathering as early as 4 a.m. to avoid detection, they kept worshipping.

How evangelicals have been affected by Ortega’s government

According to [CSW](#), a British-based organization that advocates for religious freedom, violations against the faith practice of Nicaraguan Protestants have been less visible than those against the Catholic Church.

Anna Lee Stangl, CSW’s head of advocacy, noted in a recent publication that the Catholic Church is a single religious organization whose structure spreads geographically and has a clear, public hierarchy.

“The Protestant Church is made up of many different denominations and independent churches, some of which may be dominant in one part of the country and absent in another, and which do not necessarily work together or even communicate,” she said.

In both Catholic and Protestant communities, violations reported by organizations and faith leaders are similar: restrictions on the length, location and frequency of services; prohibition of processions; invasion of masked men into churches; theft or destruction of religious objects and infiltration of informants.

“The situation has seriously worsened,” said Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer who keeps a record of religious freedom violations.

According to her latest report, 870 violations were committed against the Catholic Church between 2018 and 2024, and 100 against Protestants in the same period.

Additionally, said human rights organization Nicaragua Nunca Más, more than 256 evangelical churches have been closed by the government in the past four years, while 43 Catholic groups have been targeted since 2022.

At least 200 religious leaders have fled Nicaragua, the organization said. More than 20 were stripped from their citizenship and 65 have been indicted for conspiracy and other charges.

The Nicaraguan government did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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An American pastor’s tale

Pastor Jon Britton Hancock didn't see it coming.

How could he suspect that 11 pastors from his evangelical church could be arrested if Ortega’s government had greenlighted their operations for years?

He and his wife, both Americans and founders of [Mountain Gateway](#), started working in Nicaragua in 2013. Two years later, they sent their first missionaries and began collaborating with local pastors.

For the next decade, they developed fair-trade coffee practices, offered disaster relief to families affected by hurricanes and organized mass evangelism campaigns.

But then, it all suddenly changed.

In December 2023, 11 of his church’s pastors and two lawyers were arrested; their families didn't hear from them for months. It wasn’t until Sept. 5 that [they were released](#) on humanitarian grounds.

Hancock wondered why this happened. Though he never engaged in political discourse, he had preached in Congress and to the national police. He had met with officials. Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, had sent notes congratulating him on his church's work.

"I think the real reason is the Gospel is a threat to totalitarian ideas," Hancock said. "Our perspective is about personal relationship with God and it's based on love. And love doesn't thrive if there's control or coercion."

With Ortega's measures against faith communities, he said, not only freedom is lost.

Confiscations by the government have been a blow to church investments. And, in many cases, pastors imprisoned or forced into exile are the providers for their homes.

Mountain Gateways' local leader, Walder Blandon, was arrested with his wife, so they were both separated from their 2-month-old baby. He and his brother, who is two years older, had to be taken in by their grandmother, who had health issues, until their parents were released in September.

"So, whether or not the Nicaraguan government intends for people to be fearful, I can promise you that there is much fear and people are responding," Hancock said.

He, too, has heard of multiple people holding house meetings to pray. Parishioners' modest sound systems are no longer an option, he said, because a guitar or a piano could attract police asking for a registration, so congregations have gone underground.

"It's not very known what's happening with evangelicals in Nicaragua," he said. "Evangelical pastors don't take their stands in the same way that Catholic priests do, so it's kind of gone under the radar, but it's certainly there."

There's nothing left but leaving

One pastor had already gotten used to police watching his sermons and strangers listening to his conversations, but when someone told him "they're after your

head,â? he decided he should flee.

â?The government wants to control everything,â? said the evangelical leader, who agreed to an interview on the condition his name and new home base be withheld for safety reasons. â?They fear that if one speaks against the government, the people will rise.â?

In his hometown, he said, he was targeted by informants who would seek to make his acquaintance, then surreptitiously use their phones to record sounds or video that the government might find of interest.

Now, with him gone, his family no longer goes to church. They worship at home and he joins them from a distance, praying for his people and the government, for justice and peace.

Alvicio, too, has kept his faith strong.

His church might be gone and he yearns to return to his country, but through his prayers, he remains tied to his land.

â?We, the Moravians, believe that wherever we are, we can pray to God,â? he said. â?So I can walk and speak and think bearing that power, knowing that, even if Iâ?m alone, heâ?ll be with me.â?