

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

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D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

I'm here once again with Armando Rodriguez at his house. And we're here to talk about the years from 1965 to 1968, and the first area we are going to address today is the difficulties of maintaining the church under very restrictive circumstances under the Castro regime from 1965 to 1968. Is that correct Armando?

R: Yes, that's right.

D: OK. That's our first subject for today.

R: Yeah, I have very great memories about that time. The government was in the position to destroy the church and the Christian faith in any... in all the ways of Cuba. For that purpose, they had a great battle by the newspaper and all the revolutionary propaganda, and they were telling the people through the radio and TV and the newspapers that the Christian faith was something of the past time, not for the new time. The new time in Cuba will be for scientific work, for education, for culture and so. But the church was a problem for this goal of the Revolution. For that reason, they used it as a way for interrupting the church work. They had different things, they did different things. For example, in the newspaper, in the radio and the TV they said that the church belonged to the past; the church belonged to the "burguesía"

D: Bourgeois?

R: Bourgeois, yeah.

D: Good Marxian term. Trying to teach people how to be good Marxists, right?

R: Of course, of course. And then...

D: In Marxism religion has no place.

R: Yeah. And then...

D: It's the opiate of the masses.

R: Yeah

D: Correct? Now, how much of that was put out by the Cuban government? Did they quote Marx a lot? Did they use "religion", "opiate", did they use these kind of phrases "opiate of the masses"?

R: Of course

D: And that was also ingrained into the education system, the elementary school

R: Of course, the elementary school and all the levels of the education in Cuba, but also, as I told you, through the radio, the newspaper and TV; but more than that, through the slogans...

D: Propaganda

R: Propaganda, slogans and propaganda. They put big announcements of all this reality, and then, they put a great fear in many of the Cuban Christians. In the same time, they made a great propaganda war with families, with the workers and so. As I told you in, I think in other way, they... every Christian student in High School and college, they put one communist youth as a "padrino", godfather.

Their task was to gain their friendship but to say, to them that if they maintain their faith they will not be able to go to the University and so, and so, and then, of course, my older daughters and son, they were victims of this reality, but in the same way, especially in the University. They had big gatherings of the students and then in these occasions, they would call Christian students that maintained their faith, and they would call them before the people gathering and they said "you are against science; you belong to the past; and so, if you are a faithful Christian you don't belong in the university" and they expelled them from the universities. And of course this made a very dangerous situation for the Christian students and for the old people that they have this system where some friend would tell them that if they maintain their faith they will not be able to have some promotion or so. And then, with the children, they started a plan that they called "plan de la calle", "street plan", and then they put this "plan de la calle" or "street plan" on the street in front of the church. And in one hour before we begin our Sunday school for our children, they started the "plan de la calle" where they put the children to have some play, some fun, they distributed some "caramelos" [hard candy].

D: Coloring books?

R: Coloring books and many other things in the way of the children that planned to come to our Sunday school, so they must be in this situation and so. And some teachers in the primary school,

they asked to every child if they have faith. And one time, Dorkas, one of our daughters, when she was in the first or the second grade, came some soldier to the classroom, put their pistol on the desk of the teacher, and he asked to the children “ there are here some Christian children here; please “levante la mano”

D: Raise your hand!

R: Raise your hand! And only my daughter Dorkas raised her hand. And then he was very angry and he answered “Do you believe in God? Tell me where is God that I will kill him with this pistol” and so. They used other different systems, for example, the teacher someday asked the children to close their eyes and the teacher asked “please, with your eyes closed, ask God to bring you ice cream. Ready? You asked God to bring you ice cream? OK. Open your eyes. Where is the ice cream?” Of course, there was no ice cream. After that she asked: “please, close your eyes and ask Fidel to bring you ice cream.” And after some minutes she asked: “open your eyes”. And there was ice cream for all the children. “Did you see? God didn’t give you anything, but Fidel is giving you some.” And in that way, different systems, they struggle very, very hard against the Christian church and so, but Thanks be to God, we had in that time a good remnant of people who were faithful to God and they paid a great price for maintaining their faith.

D: Now, can you reflect a little bit on what, what this did to families? In other words, mother, brother, sister, children... did some families participate in your church and then other members of the family not, and how was that harmful and destructive?

R: Yeah, this was one of our biggest pastorally difficult problems, because there were many families in which some of the members were very faithful Christians but others were Communist. They were in the Revolution propaganda, and especially, the situation was very hard between the spouses...

D: Spouses.

R: Spouses yeah, because one of them was member of the Communist party and the other was member of the church and the..., many of them of course were divorced, but many of them, the Christian member of the family maintained their faith and they paid a big price for maintaining their faith. Of course, the difficulties were with the children, because the communist member of the family didn’t like to have the children in the Sunday school, so we had a lot of problems in that family situation. But our preaching and our goal was to be an instrument of reconciliation between the community in general but also in the family. And then our orientation to the Christian member of every family was, “well, you must be faithful to God but you must be open to your husband or your wife or your brother and so, and don’t fight with them. Ask them to respect your point of view in the same way that you respect their point of view, and to find a point that unites you, and to put out the point that divides you. And I think that this was a very hard task, but we did it in the best way with the help of God. Thanks be to Him.

D: Now, would you say this was more common among men, or women, or was it, was there no pattern? Were women more, tended to be more Christian or were the men in the family more, or was there any pattern at all?

R: Yeah, of course there was, there was in both sides, but when the women was the member of the party and the man or the spouse was the Christian leader, men had more control, more personality. But when the man was the communist, he put more pressure on in his wife in these things. Of course we had many other situations. For example, in one of these years, we had a big problem in the Methodist church of Santa Cruz del Sur in Camagüey. Our young pastor, José Ramón Ruiz, was, he was not graduated in the seminary, we trained him by extension and so, and he was appointed to that church, and then, in the summer time, when we had the assembly or gathering of young people and teenagers, he had a program in his congregation in Santa Cruz del Sur, to help with the money for the trip of the young people of his church that will participate in the youth and teenager gathering, assembly. And then he had one program where they asked the congregation to bring some food and some other things to sell so they could use this money for the tickets for the group of young people; and then the government sent some members of the party to this gathering and when they were selling some products by to raise money but asking “who will give more for that product?” then they offered a big amount. If the normal price was 1 or 2 pesos, they said “oh, I will give 10 pesos or 20 pesos” and of course, they received the product, but after that, the police accused the pastor that he was in the church exploiting the people. And why? Ah, because you sold this product for 10 or 20 dollars and here is the man who paid in that situation; and then he asked to judge the pastor in the work center, and they bring hundreds and hundreds of workers of all the rural areas around, there were maybe 500 or 800 workers from all the region, seeing the judge. And they then accused the pastor “you are exploiting the people in Santa Cruz del Sur, because you sell this product for 10 or 20 dollars and so, and they brought the people who paid that and so and so, and then, when the pastor advised me about that situation, I went to this place at this time. I was there with the people gathered there, and before they gave the judgment, they asked, “is there somebody here who would like to speak about that?” And then I raised my hand and they didn’t know me but they asked, and I raised my hand and they asked me to come in front with the microphone and so, and then they asked me, “what is your name?” “Mi nombre es Armando Rodríguez.” “What is your work?” “I am the Bishop of the Methodist Church in Cuba.” And you must know that when I told them that I was the Bishop of the Methodist of Cuba, the Bishop of this pastor, all the [people] gathered were impacted, and they asked “what do you have to say in this situation?” and then I spoke very slowly and said “I thank you for giving me this opportunity and I’d only like to say to you the judge and this [people] gathered here that there are some mistakes in this situation. You know that this activity was to raise funds for the participation of a group of young people from the city to our national gathering of youth and teenager people, and this was supposed to be only inside in our group, in our congregation. I am sorry very much that there were other people from outside of our church and they paid this big amount of money. I don’t agree with that price. I don’t understand why they needed to pay that price” and so and so. And after my presentation there was somebody important in the party who then came to the microphone and spoke against me and so, and so. And this, my word was very bad, because this was not in accordance with the trial that they were doing there and so, and in the end, the pastor was condemned to work in the

sugar mill without payment for 50 or 60 days. And then, the judge ended, and I spoke with the pastor and told him “oh José Ramón, I am so very sorry for you, because you will have to pay this price without any fault. But I exhort you to go every day to your work and work as hard as possible, as you will be able, and this will be your sermon, not for the congregation but for all the workers in the sugar mill who are saying “who are you?” and “who are the pastor and the Christians?” He was very angry and he asked, no Bishop, I’d like to appeal to other level that this was an unjust situation. “no, no, no” I told him “José Ramón. Be quiet and pay your price.” And he did it, and before the end, before he paid all the amount of time that he must work, the government asked him “no, it’s ok, you don’t need to come any more to complete the sentence” and so. And in that way there were different situations, different actions in the church that the revolutionary...

D: That’s fine.

R: Well, in that time, I think it was in November of 1965, the government started the UMAP: Unidad Militar Ayuda a la Producción. Military Unit to Help the Production, and in the project they put together pastors of the churches, priests of the Catholic church, leader of the Christian youth people, and also the “lacría social”, the homosexual, and all the moral, immoral people, they put together under the military regime to work. All of this can give an idea of how hard was this time for us. Because there was a plan, with activities to clubber against the church and so. But thanks be to God, we had a group of faithful Christians, who maintained their faith, maintained their activity in the church, assisted the church every Sunday, and we had also young people as lay preachers so that in any week, we never had to close any church. All the pulpits in the Methodist church were open and with the message for the Christian people in the church. I remember that in one rural place in Oriente, a church in a town called La Criolla, near Holguín and Central Báguanos, some people rebelled against the revolution. There was some problem in that region, and they executed several of the neighbors in that occasion, and there was a very fearful atmosphere in that occasion. Well, that Sunday, I decided to go to this chapel, to this church, and to have the church open. Really? No body come to this service. But I was there, as Bishop, as District Superintendent, all the time I prayed by myself, all the time I sing some hymn, but the church was open even in the bad, in the worst situation...

D: Now, what year was this?

R: I don’t know exactly, but was in that day...

D: 65 through 68? You were Bishop right?, You were Bishop?

R: Yeah. No, this was before I was the Bishop, I was the District Superintendent in Oriente in that time...

D: OK.

R: then this was before..., this was maybe 1965 or so...

D: OK.

R: OK. And the other important task in that time from 1965 to 1968 was to prepare everything for the autonomy of the church. We worked very hard to write the principles of faith of our church. All the discipline-and you know we the Methodists, we have a big book of discipline! We didn't have one book as here in the States, but we put all the main organization points in our discipline. And, of course, this was a very hard work, but thanks be to God, we did very well, of course, in that occasion until January 1967, we had the great contribution of our leader in Cuba, Dr. Angel E. Fuster, and he guided us in all these matters. And also, the seminary students, the Methodist seminary students in the Seminary of Matanzas, they made a great contribution for that work and so.

D: So is the seminary were still in operation?

R: Yes, yes. All the time the seminary, thanks be to God, was in operation in...

D: Even after 59?

R: Even after 59 and so.

D: Now, did it remained open for ever, or was it ever closed?

R: No, it's open. But now I can tell you that we had some difficulties in this seminary. Why? Because this is a union seminary supported by the Presbyterian church, the Episcopalian church and the Methodist church.

D: In Cuba or outside of Cuba?

R: In Cuba, all these churches in Cuba. And we had a board of directors with the same number of delegates from each of the three churches. But what happened? That at some point, the Methodist church was excluded in some way in all the administration and the life of the seminary. Why? Because the two churches, the Presbyterian and the Episcopalian, they are more in favor of the Revolution.

D: So they are trying to be compatible with the Revolution and they set the reality of the Revolution as being permanent, and they are trying to placate the Revolution, or to...

R: Yeah, and to give to the theological education some... in some way...

D: Some element of socialism?

R: Some element of the socialism and ...

D: Liberation theology?

R: But not the liberation of theology we accepted in general. There are very good thoughts in the theology of liberation but we don't like to have any political compromise in Cuba.

D: Well maybe we can get into some of that later on. Maybe we can look into that a little bit later on when we get more down to the present.

R: Of course.

D: But for now we can understand the, that the Matanzas seminary continued on, even after, even into the 1960's

R: Yeah

D: And continued to produced new pastors?

R: Yeah

D: So that was always a resource that you could draw from then, in your Bishopry.

R: Of course, and we were very open to not having any confrontation, but to cooperate and to have our best that we can have in the seminary.

D: I got you off track from what you were going to talk about. Go back to what we were talking about before, before we got into the makeup of the seminary. Now, where were we?

R: We were in the work for the autonomy, and then this was wonderful in many ways. Why? Because when we were discussing our Principles of Faith, we, the new leadership in Cuba, we had the blessing of being together in our theological thinking, and then when we worked in different aspects of our Discipline and way of work for the Methodist Church in Cuba, we made our best to..., to have one Discipline that was able to work in our reality in Cuba in our situation. And this gave to us the leadership of the church in Cuba, because we, not only met our Discipline, our Principles of Faith and so, but we put ourselves together in our projection for our work and for our future.

D: So that I understand, what we are talking about now is the decision in 1968 to break from the United States and to form an autonomous Methodist Church in Cuba, correct?

R: Yes.

D: Ah... and so we touched on some of this before, but now you're, now you are talking about it, ah... that's kind of where we ended last time, isn't it?

R: Yes.

D: So now we're looking forward into that. So how did that unfold? How did that process begin and what were the successes and failures of it?

R: Well, as I told in the other... before, in December of 1963, we had a special session of our Annual conference in Santa Clara, and we agreed to ask to the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in the States to grant us the permission for the Autonomy. This was in December of 1963 and then in 1964, the General Conference agreed to grant us this permission, even when Carlos Perez was against this. But they grant us the permission to organize our Autonomous Church, and then in 1965, we began to work in all the matters of the Discipline and the organization and how we will work in our situation in Cuba. Yes. This was a great experience that when, in January of 1967, this is was great impact to our church, but thanks be to God, all the Cuban Methodists were ready to work for Christ, even when the situation for the pressure of the struggles from..., the Revolutionary government or for the loss of our leader in Cuba, they were ready to fight, to work for Christ in Cuba by themselves, by ourselves, and all this bad situation, this made us stronger persons. Our decision to pay the price for maintaining the church in Cuba and to continue the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ was stronger in all the Methodist people who remained faithful to God in all the struggles with the government and the new political and economical and social situation. All these difficulties made us the Methodist people in Cuba more and more strong and faithful to God. This is a reality: that God will change the bad things in a blessing. We experienced that. And this makes us the Cuban Methodist people sure that we will be able to do everything that we like to do for the glory of Jesus Christ, for the glory of God. No, nobody, nothing that we had to confront will stop us in our decision to be faithful to God. I think that this was a great reality that put in a deep experience our Methodist Church in Cuba, and you must know that, many years before in the 1940s and in the 1950s some Cuban Methodist leaders they thought that the Methodist Church in Cuba must be organized as an Autonomous Church in the same way that Mexican Methodist Church, and the Korean Methodist Church, and the Brazilian Methodist Church. But what was the answer of the wonderful missionaries, American missionaries that we had in that time? "Oh, this is great idea, and this is a great goal, but you are not prepared now for that situation, we must wait and wait." And this was the answer every time that

D: How did you feel about that at the time? How did you feel at that time about that?

R: Well, in that time I was not a Methodist leader

D: But you were young and you were just beginning, but, but what was that general feeling of other Cubans about that kind of behavior, that kind of, kind of statement?

R: Well, There were... two, two ways of feeling. There was a group of people who liked to have dependence, that they agreed, that they said "oh yes, we don't have the education and the capacity of our good missionary brothers. Without them we will not be able to do our own work. And this was a mistake, because the reality that the United Methodist Church in Cuba become an

Autonomous Church, this did not mean that we will put the American Missionaries out of the church. There was a task for all. But we liked to have the Autonomous Church eh... in the... Cuban philosophy, in the Cuban reality. But they thought in the same way. I will ...

D: And then the other, what was the other, the other group? What did they say?

R: The other group, they think that with the help of God we will be able to do our best in our... for our...

D: So when did you begin thinking that?

R: Really, in all the time from the beginning when I was a young person I think in that way. This was my feeling. Of course, we have a gratefulness for all that we received from our mother church in the United States. We have a great appreciation for all our missionaries. We admired them because they left the United States, they left their families, they left their comfort here and they went to Cuba when we had a very bad health and education and transportation difficulties there. But we thought that we, the Cuban people, in the same way that other countries, we must have, we must pay the price to gain all Cuba for Christ. And we were ready to receive all the help that we can receive from others, and specially from the American church, but we liked to put the Methodist church in the will of the Cuban character and philosophy, and then I think, that this has been the great blessing and the growth of our church right now, is because we had in 1968 one Autonomous church, and thanks be to God, we can say for the glory of God, that we put the base of the church in a real Christian way. What do I mean? The church in Cuba is working and leading in the same level that we have the reality of the Cuban people. For example: The salary of the Bishop and the salary of the pastor are the same that the norm, the medium salary of the Cuban people, and for me, this is a great contribution, a great reality, because when the church leaders are thinking that they like to live in their own country with the level of the people in the United States, in the level of the Methodist pastors in the United States, this is wrong, this doesn't work, because we must be one with our people. And we, in our process, I didn't learn how to be a Bishop. In that time we didn't have any relationship with the church in the States and the church in other countries. We were completely isolated. But this was good in some way because we were what we as Cubans were. And then, thanks be to God, the foundation of the church was that, we are not in Cuba looking for a position, to be a Bishop to have any different compensation or salary. We liked to be the Bishop of the church to guide all the Cuban people doing the work of God, and without any other second purpose in our life. And I think that, really, I am very proud of our history, of our autonomous church. I am very happy because in all our struggle, our disadvantages, and so, we were able to be victorious and faithful to God, and we had in that way a very united church, monolithic church I will say, because we, in the different levels of the organization and the work of the church, we had a representation of all the reality in the Cuban church. We didn't have any discrimination against any persons for their philosophical or ideological position or for nothing. We are one in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. And I think, I will repeat, this was the key reality that gave us the blessing to be an Autonomous Church. We were not prepared for to be an autonomous church. On the contrary. We lost all our leaders, we lost all our missionaries, we lost all our social institutions and such,

but we were together to be faithful to God and to preach the gospel for all of Cuba, not only one group of Cubans, but all that liked to hear the message of God. We had a respect for the atheist people, for the communist people. We didn't seek any, any controversy with them, but we were open in love for them, and ready to live in the same community as Christians, if they liked to live with us, but maintaining our great conviction, Christian conviction. Of course, in that situation, in that date from 1965 to 1968, we developed our work in the same reality of Cuba. For example, in that time, and even now, every Cuban had their ration cut. If we liked to have our Annual Conference, if we liked to have our youth assembly or women assembly or men assembly, we didn't have in that time any place where we could buy certain amount of rice and beans and meat and other food. No. We had all the meetings that were necessary and we ate every day the three meals. Why? Well, when we were planning our gathering, three or four months before, we sent a promotion to every church and then we asked to every Methodist person in Cuba, to give from their ration cut, some amount of rice and beans, and coffee and vegetables and everything. And then when the pastors and the lay delegates came to the gathering, they brought to our kitchen all these foods. And I'd like to tell you that this was other great experience that we had. In that time, the dollar was illegal in Cuba. In that time, we didn't have as now, shopping centers to buy in dollars. We could not buy any pound of food. But we had only the contribution of all the Cuban Methodist church. What does this mean? That all the Cuban Methodist people were involved in all our gatherings and in all our work. And they not only gave some amount of their food, but of course they also prayed for our meeting prayed for the future of the church. And I can tell you, that these gatherings, the Annual Conference, the Youth Assembly, the Women Assembly, the District Conferences, we called them, the great Methodist Festivals, because there was a happiness, a great joy to make and to share our experience and how God was working in our life, in our family, in our problem, in all our life. And this was, my friend, the best experience that we can have in that time.

D: Well, let me ask you a few questions about that.

R: Of course.

D: First, did you have this at one specific time in the year every year?

R: Yes.

D: Was there a month that usually was...?

R: We had the district conferences more or less in January and February.

D: OK.

R: Different situations. And then we had district conferences not one day, three or four hours as we have here. We had at least two or three days of conference. Then, the people lived together, they eat together and they praised the Lord together.

D: Was this in Havana all the time or other places?

R: No, the District Conferences were in some local church in each district. And of course there were different churches in each district that they liked to have the Annual Conference was every year in June. The second or the first week of June. Why? Because the school year ends in the beginning of June in Cuba. Then we liked to have our Annual Conference after the end of the education year in Cuba, because in that way, the Methodist church members who were teachers can come, and also we can move the pastors without any damage for their children, because they will go to other place to preach without any change and so. And then, the organization gathering or assembly, I mean the youth, women and men and teenager, we had in the summer time, maybe in July, August and September. Well, before September, because the first week of September, the education year began again. Then, in July and August we had the gathering for each organization in Cuba.

D: Now, did you ever have any trouble from the government during these events where there a lot of people assembled, and people coming from various places? Did you have trouble with the government? You can probably recall a lot of instances over the years...

R: Of course.

D: Because this would've gone way up into the 1970's I'm sure.

R: Of course. We needed to ask permission to the government to have this special gathering. We didn't need to have permission for every local activity, but for other regional gatherings or national gatherings we must.

In general they grant us this permission and so. There was some time of difficulty, but that was in the 70's, that they like to, to put more close...

D: Control?

R: Control on the church...

D: In the 1970's?

R: Yeah. And they, for example, they said that every gathering must have only certain number of people. And this was impossible for us. This was a great problem, because they don't like to have big gathering and so. But we struggled against that and so, and we succeeded in this situation. Yeah. Other question?

D: Ah... OK. I guess this is the end of our day, and we will begin here next time with the consecration

R: And the Autonomous conference

D: And the Autonomous conference next time we meet.