

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

D: Today is June 3rd and I'm here once again with Armando Rodriguez and we are beginning a new day and today we are going to begin to talk about your involvement in the Christian Conference for Peace.

R: Yes. In the 1970s somebody invited me to participate in a very interesting gathering. This was the Christian Conference for Peace, one organization supported mainly by the Orthodox Church in Russia and with a good participation from leaders of the churches in the socialist countries in Europe. As I said, the main support of that organization, I mean who paid the travel of the delegates, who paid the meetings, was the Orthodox Church in Russia, but the central office was in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and this was a pretty good experience for me. Why? Because in spite that all the meeting and all the matter that they worked were in a socialist interpretation of the faith or the participation of the Christians in the Soviet Union goal for their strategy for the world and against the United States, but this permitted me to have a different and world-wide vision about the church in general, and to know other leaders who were in the same situation, in a socialistic country as we were in Cuba. This was a very good understanding and I learned a lot from that occasion. I was member of the Disarmament Committee of this organization and we had a gathering of the committee and also for all the committee or the general assembly of the Christian Conference for Peace in different places. For that reason I visited the Soviet Union maybe about 6 or 10 times, because as the Russian Orthodox Church paid for my trip, all the trip always were through Moscow. We flew from Havana to Moscow and then from Moscow to Czechoslovakia, or other places where we had the meeting, the gathering.

D: How many people were at these gatherings?

R: This depends. When it was the meeting of my commission there were maybe 15, but when we had general gatherings there were 300 people; even we had in many of these gatherings a group of delegates from the churches here in the States and this was another way that I had contact with some Americans in the Soviet or communist countries...

D: So Americans also participated in this?

R: Yes, some Americans. Because there were very honest leaders who liked to know and to see by firsthand

R: Yes, protestants and Russian Orthodox. They had Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and

D: Now were there any of your colleagues able to go with you or did you go by yourself every time?

R: No. From the Methodist Church in Cuba I, myself as the Bishop and I don't know why. But there were other Cuban leaders. For example, *Dr. Sergio Arce*, the president of the Matanzas Seminary, he was one of the vice-presidents of the whole organization; he was a very important leader in that occasion and of course they invited in some occasion other Presbyterians and also they invited in one year for a meeting the president of the Cuban Eastern Baptist convention, and so. But as members of the committee and so, Dr. Sergio Arce and one or two other Presbyterian pastors and myself, we were the only members of the organization.

D: Now, did you ever have an occasion to host them? Did they visit you? Did they visit Cuba? People from these countries?

R: Well, in Cuba we had only one gathering of that organization. This was, I don't remember what year, in 1970s and this was in a hotel in *Varadero*

many years he was there but he maintained the faith and the hope. And then after 10 or 15 years there was some openness. Then he came out of the concentration camp and they continued working in the Methodist Church, and they were very faithful all the Methodist churches in Estonia, and they resisted all the oppression, and so the government and we had a wonderful Methodist church in Estonia. And in that way I heard a lot of history of faithful Methodists and Christian leaders that this made me be more faithful to God in my situation in Cuba. And this was a great blessing for me to participate in this gathering. Of course I can tell you that never any person asked me to be a member of the KGB or other. Why? In my opinion because always I was in my personal position without any openness to other political matter and so, and I suppose for that reason, in some time before after 4 or 5 years I was not a member of that organization, but I was happy because in that situation I had more time to work in my church in Cuba and I received great experience for me.

D: I know this may be

for 10, 15, 20, 29 years, and I cannot understand how they are surviving this situation, even when they don't have the Christian experience that I had and all the Christian persons have, but of course, it's the grace of God, it's God taking care of them, because He sees our heart, and when He sees that there is a person who is a good person with good sentiments, with good projects for the benefit of the people then He is with that person, because in my personal opinion, I am not sure, I don't have very specific reason, concrete or material reason to say that, but I am sure that the people in jail in the Soviet Union, in Cuba and in other communist countries who are dissidents politically with them, they use a lot of methods against the health of these persons, and in spite of that they can survive, and to be with a clear mind after 20, 25, 29 years in jail and in this process, you can believe that God is taking care of the people that suffer and the people who are persecuted for a good ideal and a good reason. For that situation, they, the communist, they cannot understand this reality and many of them have been converted to Christianity, and I heard some story, I am not sure if this is true, but I heard some study that said that Lenin, the leader of the Soviet Union, in the end, he recognized that he was defeated politically, and he recognized that hate, as the method was work that he used was not the method; that the method was the love, the love of God. Of course, the other leaders that

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R: Yes, every one of them I knew.

D: Were some more questioning than others?

R: Of course, of course. The bad situation was in the beginning. They asked me, for example “why are you traveling to Colombia and why you like to send Cuban Methodist church people to work in a literacy and evangelization program in Colombia?” Because they thought I was an instrument of the Cuban government and I will do everything under the guidance of the communists, and so, and many other questions about the Cuban church, the situation that we have there... For example, there was a situation in Cuba that was very bad for the Methodists and other congregations. Why? Because maybe after 1963 or 1965 the government took everything of the person who left the country

D: If they were in a church?

R: Even if the pastor was living in a parsonage, they took the parsonage, but thanks be to God, in the last time of Dr. Angel Fuster our leader, the office of religious affairs in the Central Committee of the party called Dr. Fuster and told him “this is a law that every Cuban who lives in the country loses everything, but we are open to do some covenant with the church. If the pastors who are planning to leave the country, they move to some relatives’ house and they ask permission to leave the country not from the parsonage, but from the house of other relative and they move there and they don’t work as pastor, we will respect this house. And this was good, but this was not understood by some of our Methodist pastors, because they had a lot of fear and they thought that if they moved to other place where they were living before, the government will not grant the permission, and then, thanks be to God, before the death of Dr. Fuster, he called the cabinet and told all the pastors in Cuba this reality, but we will not force or impose him that he will leave, but we will ask them to be conscientious and to love the other pastor who will come to the church after them and to do that, because in other way, as we had in many different churches, we lost the parsonage and then the next pastor, the other pastor after him didn’t have a parsonage to live. But, in spite of that, when Fuster died and I was the leader I had the same position and I said to every Cuban pastor, if you like to leave the country this is your decision, but please, think about the future and the future pastor of this church. And then we told them, “if you voluntarily move to the house of other relative, the church will pay your salary until you leave the country. But if you decide to remain in the parsonage, this is your decision, we will not put you on the street, but we will not pay the salary and you need to pay the price for that reason. And some of the pastors took that decision, they don’t like to move from the church, and of course we didn’t pay the salary and so.

D: I would imagine now that many of them thought, well, I can’t tell anybody, I can’t tell anybody that I’m leaving, because if I do I won’t be able to leave, so, by leaving the parsonage that would be telling people that you are trying to leave so they might be afraid that by doing that the government would find out and then they wouldn’t be able to leave and then they would be stuck with their relatives and without being able to leave. So that to me would be a very risky thing for them to do. The easier thing for them to do would

good knowledge about the situation in Cuba through personal contact with people who came from Cuba.

D: What was the rest of your time? Where else did you go and how long were you here that first time?

R: After this meeting in Miami where I have a sister there and I was living with them, I visited Orlando where my father was living at that time, and I had a wonderful family gathering in Orlando and after that I flew to Chicago. I had a very good gathering there. I can tell you that my participation was an interrogation for many of the American leaders there, but I was in the meeting as I am, very humble, not speaking much but hearing the other persons and to have a very open atmosphere for everyone and so, and then, after two or three days when they more or less saw my participation, my personal character and so, I received the visit of some newspaper man from a church publication and they had an interview with me and the title of this information was "Bishop Armando said the church in Cuba is alive" because this was a reality, this was my experience. We were attacked in many different situations, we lost a lot of things and so, but the faith of the people, the church structure was working with more or less attendance and people, but we were alive, and they saw what was my spiritual and Christian position and so and they saw that I was not so bad because some of these Cuban pastors who lived in Miami, they made a great campaign against me, telling all the levels...

D: Was this after you visited them or before?

R: Before and after.

D: So they were waiting for you.

R: They were waiting for me and they were in charge to set everyone who they thought that I was.

D: So did any of those follow you to Chicago?

R: No, no.

D: But they had their connections up there and they poisoned the thinking of people against you and so you had to confront that when you went up there.

R: Of course, of course. But it was a great experience for me. But after that, I came to the States not frequently but every 2 or 3 years and the situation against me was very, very hard.

D: It never really changed?

R: No. On the contrary.

D: It got worse.

R: Yeah, it was worse. In one occasion I remember, I worried for my family in Miami because some radio station of people very strong against Fidel, they knew that I was in Miami and then through the Cuban radio they said: here is the Bishop Armando Rodriguez, one communist, one person who is Fidel's follower and you must know that. He is walking in Miami streets. And this was very dangerous for me and my family had a lot of sorry about that, but Thanks be to God nobody did anything against me and God protected me. Of course, some of my good friends whom I had told I would be in Miami these day, they didn't say anything to the other persons. They maintained that in secret and they protected me and they were my driver and so, and I'm very grateful to them. And also there was a pastor who was very, very supportive of me. This was Rev. Daniel Pelay.

D: Was he a Methodist minister?

R: He was a Methodist minister, he was a great person, a great...

D: Did you know him in Cuba?

R: Of course, of course. He was one of my District Superintendents and he was the pastor who was appointed to the *Marianao* church when I was elected as Bishop and he knew perfectly me, my wife, my children and so, and then, he was able to invite me to preach in his congregation in Hialeah, and do you know what? He told me that he received some telephone call telling him that somebody will put a bomb in his church, because he invited me to preach. Of course I preached and they didn't do anything, but this was the situation, and even when I came after my retirement in Cuba in 1990, I came to the United States

have this situation and so, and then she invited me to work in her independent congregation and this was our human and economical salvation because she rented for us a little apartment in the *Pequeña Havana* in Miami, and she paid us \$250 every week. and they paid my rent and they bought, all the congregation bought everything for us to live and so and in that first year I asked Bishop Hughes who was the Bishop here in Lakeland for an interview. I knew him in the worldwide gathering of the World Methodist Council and so, and I asked him for work and he asked me: what kind of work are you looking for? And I told him: I'd like to be a Hispanic pastor in any Hispanic congregation that you have and then, in the next Annual Conference he gave me, with the disapproval of the other Cuban Methodist pastors in Miami, he granted me an appointment in one of the churches in South Miami around Perrine. But this was good for me because in that way...

D: What did they think about that?

R: They were against and even my friend told me, oh Armando the Bishop must grant you an appointment, but not in Miami, and I said, why? I have no problems with Miami.

D: And he said: they have a problem with that!

R: They had their problem, not my problem, and then when I was appointed to this church, some of these wonderful friends of mine, they spoke with the leaders and they said to them: do you know who will be your pastor? This is a communist person and he will destroy the church and so. But it was the contrary. The church grew and this was in 1991 and one year later, in August 24 of 1992, we had the visit of Saint Andrew.

D: Saint Andrew?

R: The hurricane Andrew.

D: Oh, Andrew, hurricane Andrew, I'm sorry.

R: Huracan Andrew, but I called it *Saint Andrew*, because...

D: Yes, that would have been 91 or 92.

R: 92, I remember perfectly. August 24, 1992, and this was very, very bad in my congregation, but of course, I was ready to be in a different situation and I was visiting our membership and working with them.

R: Yeah, I went to this church in July 1991 and this was in August. One year and one month after that.

R: My wife and I were ready to confront every difficulty. The roof of my parsonage was destroyed in a big amount and then Bishop Hughes bought or rented one special house, a mobile home for each one of us, and we moved to this place until the parsonage was fixed, and we worked very closely with the congregation and with the community. We had a distribution of water and food in my church and I was working as I like, and then the people knew who I was and the situation changed and so. And the reality is that the person who was more strong against me, he had a lot of problems, even problems in his

3 or 4 months after us here, and then Armando Jr. came in 1996 or so as a student in Garrett Seminary in Chicago. Then when we came we had only one daughter, but after that Dorcas daughter and her family and Armando by himself as a student here, and then our oldest daughter, Alida who was in Costa Rica, she and the family of her husband were granted a visa in Canada where they are living right now.

D: Ok. How many years were you in Lake Placid? It began in 1994, correct?

R: Yes. I lived in 1994 and we were pastors there for three years until 1997. In that occasion we went as missionaries to Honduras, but we will speak about Honduras in another occasion. Our experience in Lake Placid was difficult but good at the same time. The problem with the pastor between ourselves was great. He was in sabbatical time because he had some personal and moral problem and this church was founded by him and he did a great work. He established a great, a wonderful Spanish congregation and even he started one Anglo congregation, very active and so. But with his personal problem, the church was very affected, and then the Spanish and the Anglo congregations were divided, because a group of leaders and members supported the pastor even with his problem, and the other group spoke with the Bishop and they said he could not continue here.

D: So they mainly

service at eight in the morning every Sunday, and she helped me with my sermon with