

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA

DATE: May 15, 2008

D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: My name is Mike Denham and I am once again at the home of Armando Rodriguez and we are here today to resume our oral history. Today is May 15, 2008 and we are going to go back a little bit chronologically and cover some time that we have already been through but we are going to begin with Armando Rodriguez's reflections of the two bishops that he served under in the 1950s in Cuba. The first being Bishop Roy Short and the second being Bishop John Branscomb.

R: Thank you and welcome to my home and God bless your life and your work and everything.

D: Could you reflect a little bit about Roy Short and what kind of person he was and how you came to know him as well as your memories of him during his time as bishop starting in 1952?

R: I think that he was Bishop of Cuba from 1948 until 1956. Bishop Short and Bishop Branscomb were the two Bishops from Florida and were at the same time were the Bishops of Cuba. I have a great memory of them. I can say that their life, their ministry, their love to God, and the Methodist Church in Cuba was a great challenge to my life at that time, a young person of twenty-two or twenty-four years old. Bishop Short made a great contribution to the Methodist Church in the 1950s. He helped build different churches in Cuba; one of them, San Pablo Methodist Church, in *Camagüey*, where Reverend Victor Rankin was the pastor and he also helped build the Methodist Church near the University. We called it the University Methodist Church in Havana. Now it is also the Central office of the Bishop in Cuba. Bishop Short was also organized with Dr. Harry Denman, the General Secretary of the General Board of Evangelists. Dr. Denman was a layman and he was not married. He said that he tithed on the reverse. He gave the church ninety percent of his salary and used for himself the ten percent. We had many chapels and different places that Dr. Denman built with his money.

D: What was his profession?

R: I don't know exactly. But I know that he was a layman and, in my opinion, he worked full-time as the General Secretary of the General Board of Evangelists.

D: Was he an American?

R: Yes, he was an American. Dr. Denman and Bishop Short established the International Evangelical Campaign in Cuba every year. They came with more than one hundred American Methodist pastors to the different local churches in Cuba for an evangelical campaign in every church and every school in Cuba. This had a tremendous impact in the development of our church in Cuba. Also, through this campaign, we had a very good relationship with different churches in the United States and Cuba, which created many, many good things. For example, one year at the Methodist Church in *Cienfuegos* we had a pastor from Grand Rapids, Michigan and when he went back to his local church he spoke about his experience. There was an American family in his church, the Thomas family, asked if they could host a young girl in their home to study in high school in the United States. Two of my sisters came to the Thomas home and studied in the United States. There were many, many other spiritual offerings and cooperation between the churches. Bishop Short, together with Dr. Harry Denman, started this wonderful work. His faith, his humbleness, his personality, and his character was very, very good and the Cuban Methodists received him with a lot of love. At the end of the 1950s decade there was a project that was not possible to do. It was a project to build a big church in *Santiago de Cuba* that contained Roy Short's name in his memory. But, when the revolution took the power in 1959, it was impossible.

D: Can you tell me know about your memories of Bishop John Branscomb?

R: Bishop Branscomb was not only a great leader here in Florida and in the Methodist Church in Cuba, but he visited the missionaries in Brazil and many other Latin-American countries. He died in 1958 from a heart attack. Bishop Short, who was the Bishop in Louisville, Kentucky at the Annual Conference, was appointed by the Council of Bishops in the United States as the Bishop of Cuba transitorily. Then, I was ordained as Deacon in 1957 by John Branscomb and in 1959, when Bishop Short was transitorily in the Annual Conference of Cuba, he ordained me an Elder. This was a great privilege, to be ordained by this great servant of God.

D: Now we will resume our conversation and go back a little in time to time periods we already discussed. The new subject we would like to look at is your various incarcerations and jail experiences before and after the Revolution.

R: Especially after the Revolution.

D: Would you like to talk about the period after the Revolution?

R: Yes. This was a very interesting experience because we thought that the Batista Army was very bad and they put many people in jail very easily, but after the Revolution we had the same experience.

D: Even more so.

R: Yes, even worse. My problem was that I was a Methodist Pastor and Methodist leader in Cuba. My first experience in jail was very early. In October of 1959, I was Pastor of the Methodist Church in *Manzanillo, Oriente* at that time. I invited the Reverend Ovidi Omaro, one of my students in the seminary, for an evangelical activity in my church. One day I brought him

to an important place for the Revolution in the *Sierra Maestra* region. We were visiting different places. One of the places we visited was the barracks of *Central Estrada Palma*, near *Jara* where Fidel defeated *Colonel Barerra*, chief of the Batista Army and seized the barracks. When we were at the barracks the Revolutionary Army put us in jail for many hours because they thought that we were against the Revolution. This was a great surprise for us because we considered ourselves in favor of the Revolution and in favor of Fidel. But, even at that time, they were very paranoid and thought that many Cuban people were against them. We were there for many hours and when we were released we went back to *Manzanillo*.

D: Were you surprised at this?

R: I was very surprised because, at that time, I thought that nobody in Cuba had any bad feelings against Fidel and the Revolution.

D: We know that you created many personal relationships in that area and people knew you and respected you. Were there any instances where people that you knew were now your captors or your guards?

R: The Revolutionary chief in *Estrada Palma* was not from this region and did not know me. I explained to him who we were and that I wanted to show my visitor the places of interest around the region, but they did not accept my explanation. They stated that they thought we were maybe against them and that we might want to do something bad against them. I suppose that he called another superior chief and they told him I was not a bad man.

My second experience in jail was in 1960 when I was in the Havana Harbor to take a ferry from Havana to West Palm Beach. Every day we had a ferry that brought to Cuba food and other things from the United States and took vegetables and other things from Cuba to the United States. They also had a group of passengers. I had my ticket for that trip that day and I was in the Harbor, in the customs office, and when I was in line and it was my turn, the soldier asked me to please stand aside. After he received the other people in line he stated that he had an order of detention for me. I asked him what had happened. Then they took me to the little office and several police interviewed me for one or two hours and asked me many, many things. I was very quiet because I did not have a problem. Some other policemen came to my interview and opened the door to the office and he asked the police who were interviewing me what they thought, was this the man or not. For me this was nothing. But, after that I understood that they asked the police that were interviewing me if they thought I was the person they were looking for. They took me and seized all my clothes and luggage and one of the police took me to the central office and put me on the third or fourth floor and went to the records and came back after one or two hours and asked me if I had an I.D. I told them I did. This began at nine o'clock in the morning and it was now about three o'clock in the afternoon. Then he said that I was not the man they were looking for. I said I was very happy to hear that and they took me back to the Harbor and I was able to then board the ferry and come to the United States at that time. What was my purpose for coming to Florida? At that time, when the missionaries left the country, when many national pastors and leaders left the country, and I was ready to be in Cuba, I wanted to see how the church in Florida was thinking about the pastors who remained in Cuba. It was not a good experience in Miami. All of them were asking me if I was going to return to Cuba and why I

was not going to stay there because they thought there was no opportunity to preach in Cuba. They were right because the situation was very bad. The relationship between the Revolution and the church was very difficult, but I felt that God wanted me in Cuba in spite of the difficulties. The problem was that my name, Armando Rodriguez, is a very common name in Cuba and I learned that there was another Armando Rodriguez that was also born in the *Las Villas* province that was traveling to Florida and Cuba and doing things against the Revolution. In the end, I was free and I traveled to the States and resumed my purpose for being here in Florida.

The third time was more problematic. This was in 1961 when we had the great campaign with the one or two hundred young people that visited house by house and gave Christian literature that was made for the illiteracy campaign that the leader of the church in Cuba had instituted before the Revolution.

D: Also, if I'm not mistaken, in 1961 there was an initiative of the Castro government to stamp out illiteracy too, is that correct?

R: Yes.

D: So, theoretically, this would have been in conjunction with the government and you could have worked hand-in-hand with them?

R: Exactly.

D: Ironically, this was unfortunate.

R: The problem was that they wanted control of everything. Visiting in the rural area and visiting with the poor people and giving them Christian literature offended them. I was visiting the group of young people working in the *Baricoa* Mountains and I was in the home of some Methodists there. Early in the morning of the first day I was there I was visiting different places and I came back to the home in the evening. When we were walking through the mountains to return to the home, there was a truck that came in front of us and stopped. Two members of the Army with big arms came to us and asked which one of us was Armando Rodriguez. I told them it was me and they said they had an order of detention for me. They were waiting in the home I was staying in most of the day, but when I did not return they started to return to the barracks. On the way they found me. They took me in the truck and let the other man return home. I asked them where they were from and we began a good conversation. I told them I was a Methodist Pastor and that I was visiting the Christian homes and supervising the work that the group of young people were doing. This created a good personal connection between me and the chief of the guards that picked me up. He told me he was suffering a lot because he was baptized in a Protestant church when he was a child but did not attend church at that time, but maintained his faith in God and that he had a big problem. He stated that his wife had cancer and that she was going to die. Then I ministered to him. This was a blessing, not only for him, but also for me because when he brought me to the barracks the political person in the barracks that ordained my detention was not there at that moment. He was visiting another place that had another problem. The soldier that picked me up said to the other chief that was in the barracks that I was

the man he was ordered to pick up but I understand that he is not a bad man. He said that when he saw a bad man doing bad things he was a very strong guard, but if he saw a good man he respected him and wanted to help him. Then the chief asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I explained to him what I was doing there and he asked me about the boxes I brought with me. I told him that they were boxes of Christian literature and that if he had any questions or doubts about that he could come with me and see what I had. I assured him that we did not have anything bad, only good things for the people. Then he said o.k., and that I was free to go. The soldier invited me to a little restaurant and he paid for my dinner. He asked me where I wanted to go and I told him I wanted to return to the home I was staying in. He told me that it was not good for me to be there and wanted to know where he could take me. I told him the name of another Christian that lived very near to that place and when we finished our dinner he asked another driver to take me to the other home. I was very happy. The next morning, the person I was staying with worked in some office that grew coffee and cacao and he told me that he could take me to the barracks that I would be able to take a truck or another car and return to the home I was staying in before. When the man took me to the barracks the person who gave the order for my arrest was there. I was in the corner waiting for another car and he passed by and stared at me two or three times. In my opinion, they were trying to put fear in me. On the third or fourth pass he asked me if I was Armando Rodriguez and I told him I was and asked him how I could help him. He stated that the guard from the night before made a mistake and that he needed to take me to the other city because I was supposed to be in jail. I asked him why and he stated that the revolutionaries wanted to do many things in favor of the rural people and there are a lot of people who were against them and he thought I was against them. I explained to him that he was wrong and that I was a pastor and that my task was to help the same people. For example, our church started the agricultural school in *Oriente* and we taught many young people from the mountains and the rural areas how to grow different crops and how to work the land. I told him we also liked to do good things for the rural and poor people. That was in front of a large group of people that were.

He told me that there was not security for my life there in that region. I asked why because I was a Christian and a pastor and that I was doing good things for the poor people. He yelled that I was not doing anything and that I was a Christian and that I was telling people many stories that were not true. A little way away from there was the soldier that picked me up the day before and at the moment when the communist leader quieted down he made a sign to me to come to him. I left the group of people and went to him and he told me that he was sorry for the situation and he repeated to me that he was a soldier and that he was against the bad people but when he saw a good person, as I was, he liked to help that person. He told me to come with him and that he would find a car for me to take and return to the home where I was staying.

D: So the leader left after this spectacle?

R: No, he was in the group but I left the group.

D: So you were able to leave after this tongue-lashing or warning?

R: Yes, because, in my opinion, he was happy to finish the discussion in that way because he didn't have a strong argument against me in front of the people. When I left the group everything was finished and he did not have to do anything more. After that I went back to the

home where I was staying and they were concerned about me. I told them that everything had been o.k. Although, I can tell you, when the soldiers picked me up in that rural area in the mountains I was scared. But, after that first moment I prayed to God and God helped me and I felt the presence of God and the company of the Holy Spirit and I was no longer afraid in any way. On the contrary, I thought it was nice to have problems because I could testify about Jesus and preach the Gospel. It was in a spirit of victory regarding all this processes I have told you about. I stayed in the area and continued to visit places. On one occasion, there was another soldier with a machine gun and bullet vest that asked me who I was. I told him I was Pastor Armando Rodriguez. He told me that he knew who I was; that I was the pastor with the white card, because I gave the soldiers my card in the barracks with my name and my task as District Superintendent. He said that he knew that I was the person that was visiting that region and that he needed to tell me that I was not welcome in that region. I asked him why and he said that it was because all the Christian people were against the Revolution and that they were soldiers of the Revolution and that they were not afraid of any other army that came to Cuba to oppose them. He then said that against us they could do nothing because we would not fight against them and he let me go. Of course I was happy to continue to visit the people.

D: So just so I understand, this was about a three or four day period?

R: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In my opinion, the communist chief that was in charge of political matters in that region spoke to the army in that region about me and they were seeing what I was doing and where I was. On Sunday evening the Baptist congregation invited me to preach and, of course, I did it and the sanctuary was full. Many people were inside the windows and the doors and I was sure that there were also a large amount of people from the government, not in army uniform but dressed as civilians, to see and hear what I was preaching about. My sermon was very strong and I spoke to them about what our task as Christians was in different situations. I told them about when I was in seminary, the president of the seminary visited some country in Africa and spoke with the grandson of an African leader that was a cannibal, and the cannibal people ate some missionary and preacher in Africa, but the grandson was a converted Christian and the president of the seminary told us about this very interesting conversation about how the Christian message changed the situation in African. I put this in my sermon as an example of what the Christian missionaries and preachers do in different places in the world where there are difficult situations, even where people were cannibals. I finished the sermon without any problem. On Monday I went back to *Holguín* and this was a very interesting experience for me. I was in a difficult situation but God helped me and God was with me at every moment and I felt I gave a good testimony to what we as Christians were, not only to the people and Christians in general, but also before the leader of the atheistic revolution.

D: What year was this again?

R: This was in the beginning of 1961.

D: Was this before or after the Bay of Pigs?

R: This was before the Bay of Pigs.

D: What was your next experience?

R: My fourth experience was in *Boíariba*, a town in the *Sierra Maestra* Mountains where we had Reverend John Stroud as a missionary and he had started a great work there. He bought about twenty or thirty acres of land and built a parsonage and a church. But, of course, in 1960 he needed to return to the United States and we appointed a Cuban lay preacher to work there. They did not have good theological training in the seminary so I needed to go to these places to supervise the work. In 1965 the government took all of our property.

D: Did they expel the people or residents immediately?

R: Yes. The permanent residents were the two lay preachers and when they took the property the preachers had to leave.

D: This went on everywhere?

R: Yes, but they had a special interest in rural places because they did not want a Christian voice.

D: Because they were afraid of potential guerilla activities like they had participated in?

R: Yes. They considered that region as their region. On March 13, 1965 a Methodist family in *Boíariba* wanted to have one of their children baptized. We did not have a sanctuary or any property but they invited me as a pastor to their home to have the baptism of their child. When the other members of the congregation knew that I was going to be in this home, many of them, sixty, eighty, or ninety people, came to that home for the baptism. When we met with this wonderful congregation and conducted the baptism of the children we had a normal service except that we did not pick up an offering. When I finished my sermon and the service someone told me there were two soldiers outside of the home that wanted to speak with me. I went to them and they asked if I would please accompany them to the barracks. The barracks was in the parsonage that formerly belonged to the church. I went with them and asked them what they wanted with me. They told me they had a lot of concern because in my sermon I stated that, and that, and that, and so. They said they there were bringing people from Cuba to the mountains to pick up coffee and to work and that I came there to have a gathering that had no importance to the economy of Cuba. I asked their forgiveness and stated that the family asked me to come and baptize their child and that as pastor I needed to come and do my job and that I did not ask all the people to come there. They were not happy and asked me to sit down. There was a group of six or eight officials who asked me to come into the room they were in and they interrogated me. They asked me who I was, where I lived, what I was doing there, and each one asked me a different question but all at the same time. I was a little disappointed. I stated that I was a good man and that I was not doing anything bad. I answered the questions as best I could. After a half of an hour or so he finished and asked me to sit down. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes later there was another group of officials, the same amount, who asked me to come into a room with them and interrogated me the same way. This happened three different times; three different interrogations with the same questions about the same matter. When they were finished they asked me to be seated in the main room. At that time they brought in another young person

that was struggling. The soldiers that brought him were being very strong with him and they did the same with him as they did with me. In the end, they put both of us in a very little room with only one official table and closed the door. Immediately I thought that the army had put a microphone in the room to hear what we talked about in that room. I stayed very quiet and thought about what I might say. After about fifteen minutes the other person asked me why I was there and asked me what my problem was. I told him that I did not have any problem and that I was a pastor that was here to baptize children and that the soldiers brought me here but that I did not have a problem. He said to me that he had a big problem and that he was participating in an activity against the Revolution. March 13th the anniversary of the death of José Antonio Eserodrilla, the leader of the student directory in Havana that attacked the Batista palace. Fidel was speaking to the Cuban people that day. The young man said that he was speaking against Fidel's speech and the army took him for that reason. I told him that I did not want to speak about his problem because I wanted to be quiet and not speak of any problem thinking that there was a microphone there. After a few minutes he asked me if I knew Raul Ecolona and Candido Paris. I told him I knew them. He asked me what I thought about homosexuals as a Christian. This upset me because I thought that maybe this person was a homosexual and they put him with me in a room to say something against my morals. I told him that the Bible said homosexuals and immoral people cannot go to the Kingdom of God but when Jesus Christ died on the cross he paid for all of our sins, even the homosexual and that Jesus can save his life if he accepts Jesus Christ as his savior. After that I told him it was getting late and that we would be there all night and I wanted to sleep. I asked him to take the side of the room he liked and that I would take the other side and he did not answer me so I told him where I wanted to sleep. I sat down on the floor and put my head on the desk. He was not quiet and he began to hit the door and then a guard came and opened the door and the young man asked for a cigarette. The guard brought him a cigarette and asked him if everything was o.k. I asked the guard if I could use the restroom before sleeping and he took me to the restroom and I returned to my spot on the floor. At around one or two o'clock in the morning some guards came to us, opened the door, and told us we could leave. I was concerned because I thought they wanted us to leave the barracks so they could kill us and say we were trying to escape. Then I told myself not to think any bad thoughts. We left together and were walking and when we were one or two blocks away I told him we did not have a problem and we were free. He told me that we were free because he spoke. I asked him what he meant. He explained to me that he was a communist and that he was with me to hear my conversation but that he saw in me a deep peace and that they knew then that I was not a bad person. He said that we were opposed ideologically but that they had nothing against the real and good Christians and that I could leave and would have no problem.

D: So did you suspect that this might be the case all along?

R: No. My concern was that he was not a good person and that they put us together to hear by microphone what we thought. I never thought that he . . .

D: So he was a good actor?

R: Yes, he was a very good actor. I congratulated him and told him he did a wonderful job.

D: So this was in March of 1965, were you in Havana at that time?

R: No, this was in March and I was in *Holguín* as District Superintendent. I was moved to Havana in June and I moved in July of 1965. This was my last experience in *Oriente*. My fifth experience took place in February of 1967. I was living in Havana but on January 5, 1967 Dr. Angel Fuster, our Methodist leader, was participating in a worldwide Methodist gathering in Ireland and after that he went to the United States for a gathering for the union of the United Evangelical Brethren. He had a son and daughter in Miami and after that meeting he came to Lakeland and Miami to visit before going back to Cuba. On January 5, 1967 he was traveling from Lakeland to Miami on Highway 27 with Reverend Geraldo Martinez. Martinez was driving and he had an accident and they were taken to a hospital in a small town to receive medical care. That night Dr. Fuster died because I think he had some internal injuries and a heart problem. This was a very hard situation because it was a big loss for the Cuban Methodist people. We lost all the American missionaries, we lost many of the Cuban pastors and leaders, we lost the school, we lost much of our social work, and his death was a tough loss for us. One month later we planned to have a memorial service in the church in *Santa Clara* where he was pastor for many years. One Sunday night we had a memorial service for him. I was the preacher and we had a lot of visitors. When we began the service with such a large amount of people, the sanctuary was completely full, and there were many other people in the street and by the windows, because they wanted the opportunity to say goodbye to him. When the service began about ten or twenty policemen came to the church, finished the service, and took all of us who were on the platform to jail. They took us to the central police station and interrogated each one of us and at midnight put us all in a jail cell and we spent the night in jail. Then they told us we were free if we paid bail money and agreed to free the pastor from *Santa Clara* to gather the money. He returned with the money for all of us and we were free to go but we were scheduled for a trial one week later. We went in front of a judge and spoke to the judge and answered his questions. We told him we had a normal service and the day of the service we did not break the law. We told him that during the service we wanted to remember the life of Dr. Angel Fuster who was pastor for many years in *Santa Clara*. We also told him that the Methodist Church did not do anything political or against the Revolution and that the Methodist Church was in Germany, in Czechoslovakia, and in many other communist countries and that we only preached the Gospel. In the end the judge said we were free.

D: We would also like to talk about the gathering in *Buenos Aires* that you attended in 1962.

R: This was a very important gathering called *Vida y Misión de la Iglesia Metodista en America Latina*, Life and Mission of the Methodist Church in Latin America. This was a meeting organized by the Board of Missions and there were delegations from all the Latin-American Methodist churches. Also the Bishop here in Florida, the official Bishop of Cuba, James W. Henley was at the meeting. We had a Cuban delegation from two sides. Two or three Cuban Methodist people from Miami and three of us, myself, Reverend Junío Gomez, and Dr. Enrique Suelo, a layman from Cuba, represented Cubans living in Cuba. This was a great experience for me because this was the first international Methodist gathering that I participated in and I learned a lot about the Methodist Church in different places. I heard the goals and challenges that the churches in Latin America had and we heard a conference of Methodist people from Europe, India, and other areas. This was a great and blessed experience for me. At that time Pan-American Airlines flew between Miami and Havana. We liked to go to *Buenos*

Aires through Miami because there was more communication between Miami and all of Latin America and also because I like to see other friends and Cuban Methodists. We went from Havana to Miami and then *Buenos Aires* and returned from *Buenos Aires* to Miami. But when I was ready to go back to Cuba the Revolutionary government passed a new law. Any Cuban citizen who left the country needed special permission to return to Cuba. This was passed while I was out of the country. Of course, there were many other pastors and evangelical leaders in the same situation. The leader of the Ecumenical Council of Evangelical Churches in Cuba sent a list of all the pastors and leaders of the different churches who were out of Cuba that wished to return. After two or three days we received the answer that all of the pastors could return to Cuba except me. This was one of the saddest times in all of my seventy-eight years because I was in Miami all my other friends and pastors were asking me to use this occasion to bring my wife and children to come here and leave but I did not think so. I not only had my wife and family, but I also had about twenty five or thirty young lay preachers in charge of different churches and I did not want to leave Cuba. This was one of the only occasions I ever took some medicine for my nerves. I was stuck in Miami for one and a half months. I called the leader of the Council and asked what happened. They said I could stay in Miami but if I wanted to come back they would make another application. I asked to please make another application for permission. At that time Eularia Cook was in Costa Rica working with the illiteracy program and they invited me to go there. I went there and spent a wonderful week with them speaking about how we distributed the literature they left in Cuba in the rural area and I learned all their plans. I returned to Miami with the desire to return to Cuba. Many things took place during that time. For example, Dr. Carlos Perez, the official from the Board of Missions in Cuba visited my wife and asked her to prepare the children and the household to leave Cuba and go to Miami. She told him that I wanted to return to Cuba and continue my work.

D: How easy was it to communicate between Miami and your wife at that time?

R: At that time it was very easy because I could call her on the phone three or four times a week. The mail was also very good. We could mail and receive a letter within one week. Then Dr. Carlos Perez met with the twenty five or thirty young preachers and told them that I was in Miami and that I was not coming back and that the all must make their circuit and return home. But all the young preachers told him that I told them that I was working to come back and that they would wait for me there. He was not thinking about the necessity of the Methodist Church in Cuba but how to manage the business and go other places outside of Cuba. But my vision, and the vision I put in the lives of these young people was different. We wanted to stay in Cuba and pay the price of our testimony and remain in Cuba until the last moment possible. We did not want to be martyrs but we had faith that God would pick us up in the last moment. After four, five, or six weeks of calling the leader I begged them to make another application and they went to the office and told them of my wish to return to Cuba. They told them they were looking for the other Armando Rodriguez because he was doing bad things against the Revolution. They told the government official that they were sure that I was not the same man but if they were not right it was the government's opportunity to get me back in Cuba.

R: Finally, I was able to go back and I knew that many government people had an interest in me. I knew that they interrogated other Methodists asking about me and what my work was. I also want to speak about . . .

D: Let me ask you one more thing before we move on. So this event was after the Bay of Pigs and before the Cuban Missile Crisis?

R: Yes, that is correct. I liked to speak about another situation inside the life of the church in Cuba at this time from 1960 to 1962. We had a struggle for power in the Methodist Church. There were two different leaders. One of them was Dr. Angel Fuster to whom Bishop Henley appointed as the auxiliary Administrator and President of the Cuban Methodist Cabinet. Dr. Carlos Perez was, before, the President of the [?] College, a big Methodist college in Havana. When the government took all of the schools and colleges, Dr. Perez was the District Superintendent in Havana, Treasurer, and representative of the Board of Missions, Dr. Fuster was the District Superintendent in *Santa Clara*, I was the District Superintendent in *Oriente*, Jose Relle-Monson was the District Superintendent in *Camagüey*, Renaldo Toledo was the District Superintendent in *Matanzas*, and Dr. Jorge Aríon was the District Superintendent in Havana and *Pinar del Rijo*. But, there was a struggle for power between Angel Fuster and Dr. Carlos Perez. Perez thought of the business of the church and Dr. Fuster thought about the spiritual aspect of the church. Every time we had a cabinet meeting there was a conflict between them. I was suffering because I was in *Oriente*, very far from Havana, and this was a very difficult time for me. I had permission to do what I wanted in *Oriente*, but they said I was crazy and that all the young people that were working with me without money or any support were a group of crazy people. When I participated in the meetings I was very disappointed. When I was back in *Holguín* meeting with our lay leaders and visiting churches there was another spirit and I was very happy to be there. Carlos Perez even sent a message to me when I was in Miami stating not to return to Cuba because he had received a visitor from the secret police and they asked him about me and the group of young people in *Oriente*. But I was sure the will of God was for me to return to Cuba.

In December of 1963, we had an extraordinary session of the Cuban annual conference in *Santa Clara*. The only matter that we discussed was the application to the General Conference of the Methodist Church in the United States that was to meet in March or April of the following year, 1964. We asked the General Conference of the Methodist Church in the United States to grant us permission to organize our church in Cuba as an autonomous church. This petition was approved by ninety-nine percent of the Cuban lay members of the annual conference and we sent this petition to the General Conference. When Bishop Henley presented our application to the General Conference in the name of the Cuban church, Carlos Perez was in the United States and he asked to speak against the petition at the General Conference. Someone told me that he said that Cubans were asking for many things and that the Revolution leaders were asking the United States for the return of Guantanamo Bay base and now the Cuban Methodist people were asking for autonomy and it was not good because this would cause a separation between the Methodist church in Cuba and the Methodist church in Florida and that they must be loyal to the American missionaries. Bishop Henley answered and said that this was the will of ninety-nine percent of the Methodist pastors and laymen living in Cuba and that he supported the application. The General Conference approved the petition to organize as a Methodist Church in Cuba. After that we worked very hard writing the constitution, the point of faith of our church, and our discipline and organization as an autonomous church. Dr. Angel Fuster did great work to complete this and a group of us contributed to this work. On January 5, 1967, Dr. Angel Fuster died due to the

automobile accident. But we said that if God was with us, even with this great loss, we will go ahead in our church.

D: Two questions. By 1963, how much money was still coming in from the United States?

R: We received without any difficulty month by month sixty percent of our budget until June of 1963.

D: So after that you would not receive any more money voluntarily?

R: Exactly. And we didn't have a Bishop for the organization of our Cuban pastors.

D: So the Bishops, Dr. Short and the others, were not coming anymore?

R: The last annual conference that was presided over by an American Bishop was with Roy Short in 1960. At the end of 1963, Bishop Henley and Dr. Eugene Stockwell, the secretary for Cuba from the Board of Missions, were allowed to come to Cuba for a visit. After that we had no other Bishops. There was a great need to have a Bishop in Cuba for organization. After the death of Angel Fuster, Bishop Henley appointed me as his Executive Auxiliary Administrator and President of the Cuban Cabinet and we were working to organize. I am very proud of the Wesleyan organization and the way the Methodist Church works. I can tell you that the way the Methodist Church works, even in the difficult times, is good. For example, we needed to appoint a new pastor the Bishop or the assistant administrator for the Bishop had the authority to appoint a new pastor. The Methodist Church, even with the very hard situation in Cuba, did not have any [?] organization. We were able to appoint a successor on every occasion.

D: Now in this 1963 event, Bishop Henley challenged Perez and said that it was the will of ninety-nine percent of the Methodist people in Cuba, this did go forward

R: That was the 1964 General Conference.

D: I'm sorry, '64. Was Perez returning to Cuba?

R: No, he was not coming back, but he wanted the power even outside of Cuba. This was his personality. Every one of us has good things and bad things in our lives. I am not criticizing him in any way, but this was the reality. He thought that he had the power, even outside of Cuba. But Bishop Henley did a great job telling the General Conference that this was the will of the Cuban pastors and lay delegates in Cuba.

D: So at that time, everything went to Fuster, he was recognized as the leader of the church. Would you call him a Bishop?

R: Well, we didn't call him Bishop, but for us he was our great Bishop, our great leader. In February of 1968, when we autonomous conference was gathered in Havana, the first action taken was to posthumously elect Dr. Angel Fuster as the first Cuban Bishop. After that they elected me the first active Bishop of the Methodist Church in Cuba. This was a very great honor

and recognition of his great leadership and faithful life. Dr. Carlos Perez wrote me a letter telling me that he did not agree with the election because he was jealous of Dr. Fuster's recognition.

Before we finish our discussion I want to share with you my philosophy and my principles during my life as leader of the church during a very difficult political and philosophical situation in Cuba. I participated in Cuban politics at the time of the Cuban Orthodox Party with Eduardo Chibbas and this was a very good experience for me because it was clear that my task was not philosophical, political, economical, or any other aspect of the life. God called me to be his servant and an ambassador of the Kingdom of God in Cuba. For that reason I had a clear idea of what I would not do. First, I told myself that I would not do anything that was not in accord with the Bible and God's will. Second, I would not say anything that was not in conjunction with God's will and the Holy Spirit. More than that, I do not want to even think about anything that is not in accordance with God's will and the word of God because I wanted to maintain my mind, my spirit, my thinking, and concentrate on the spiritual matters. I felt free to be in conference and meetings with the communists leaders and complete my task of reconciliation between the divided family that we had in Cuba without bias. In all my time as leader of the church we had a monolithic and united Methodist people in Cuba. During my time as Bishop, we had representation of all the different opinions in the church because we wanted a united church with contributions from all people no matter what their personal or philosophical or ideological position was.