

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH:** ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

**INTERVIEWER:** DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

**PLACE:** LAKELAND, FLORIDA

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**D=** DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

**R=** ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: Today is the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April and I'm here again to continue our work with the oral history of Armando Rodriguez. How are you today Armando?

R: I am fine and happy to be here with you and working on our important history.

D: We left off last time with the siege of the barracks you were involved in, where, fortunately, there was only person wounded instead of many, many others killed. That was the day that it was reported that Batista left the Island. You would like to speak now about an incident that occurred just a few months before?

R: Yes, the last months of 1958 when the political situation was very, very bad and the Batista army was killing people and so. Then, in *Báguanos* and *Tácajo* in the *Oriente* province, there were many days when we got up in the morning and knew that some people had been killed during the night. Some of them were relatives of the Methodists in my congregation and I had to be with the family and hold the funeral. This was a very hard time in my ministry at that time.

D: Would this kind of thing happen weekly, daily, monthly; how often would this kind of thing happen?

R: Well, I would say there were three or four cases every month. Not one a week, but maybe two one week then another week or two with no incidents and then another incident the week after that. Of course, our ministry was affected because when we went to have missionary work in the rural areas it was a very dangerous time. I knew, especially one time, when we left a missionary activity and went back to our home there was a group of guerillas that were very near to killing us because the situation was very bad and they did not know who was in the street at night.

D: So there were times where they were in your congregation and you were concerned or distressed that maybe they would be killed along with all your other parishioners?

R: Yes.

D: And these armed groups of people would roam the streets or the rural areas?

R: Yes.

D: Are there any specific incidents that you would like to talk about or would you just like to move on to the next point?

R: I would like to move on.

D: Back to where we left off last time, what was your thinking that day that you learned Batista had left the Island? Did you know what was going to come next? Did you have any thoughts or predictions about what this would mean?

R: Well, as I told you before, the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of 1959 was a very, very hard day for me when the guerillas attacked *Báguanos* and there were some children that were injured. I'd like to speak about the situation at that time. In my opinion, December 31, 1958, Batista and his main group of aides went to *Santo Domingo*. Before he left the country, he appointed a chief of the army in Cuba to head the government. But, on January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro was very close to *Santiago de Cuba* and when he knew the situation in *Havana* and that Batista left the country, he went directly to *Santiago de Cuba* and took the power in the army and the government there and spoke to the Cuban people from *Santiago de Cuba*. He said that he will not recognize the chief of the army that was appointed by Batista and asked for a national strike to finish that government. But, of course, the military chief didn't have any power anymore and it was not difficult and he left his post. Then, the guerilla leaders around *Havana* and in *El Escambray* in *Santa Clara* province went immediately to *Havana* and took the military and government power. Then, Fidel Castro took a large number of tanks and other big arms from the Batista government in *Santiago de Cuba* and began a journey from *Santiago de Cuba* to *Havana*.

D: Now, in your memory or your knowledge, did the army that that was left just leave, take off their uniforms and go home? Or did they join Castro's military entourage, or, what did they do? How did that work?

R: From what I remember, the situation was such that in every place, city, or rural barrack, all the army felt that since Batista left the country, Fidel won the revolution. All the military people around the country left their barracks and the government fell in a very easy way. Fidel took his journey from *Santiago de Cuba* to *Havana*, which took about four or five days because he stopped in every town and city to celebrate the victory. When he reached *Havana* and took the power, he appointed Manuel Urrutía, the Judge that was over him at his trial regarding the *Moncada* barracks attack, and did not take any specific position himself. He said that he was the commander in chief, whatever that meant. He appointed his brother Raul as the minister of the army. He appointed Camilo Cienfuego as the chief of the revolutionary army. He appointed Che Guevara as the chief of the *barracá la cabaña*, a place where hundreds of people who worked for the Batista regime were executed.

D: Was it a prison?

R: Yes, they judged very quickly and then killed them.

D: Did that process begin soon after Fidel seized power or did they first round up the people they really wanted to get and then send them there? Did that begin quickly?

R: They began quickly with the important, high-ranking members of the Batista army. But there was a very big process in which they held trials in every city and every town in Cuba and they judged all the people. This was a . . .

D: They had revolutionary committees in every city that would interrogate people that had been identified?

R: Then they would judge them and many of them were executed.

D: That's a typical process. In the French Revolution they did that, in the Russian Revolution they did that. That is a very typical process.

R: Of course, in Cuba, there was a confrontation with different ideas; the people who did not like the executions and also the people who agreed with Fidel. But, Fidel justified that because they were people who killed other Cubans, innocent and so, and they needed to do it for that reason. But, what happened was that, not only in the executions but also in the process of establishing a new government, many very good leaders in the revolution saw within five, six, or eight months of 1959, that the revolution had a lot of communist leaders and they were afraid that the communists would take the revolution from them. Then they went to Fidel and asked him to be aware of that. But, of course, this was not successful and some of the high-ranking revolutionary leaders did not agree with what was going on. For example, the chief of the revolutionary air force, who was a very close friend of Fidel, resigned his position as well as the engineer, Mañuel Ray, who was appointed as the minister of *Obras Publicas*. They did not agree with the participation of the communist leaders and resigned their positions. The largest impact was made by *Comandante* Hubert Matos, who was the chief of the revolutionary army in the *Camagüey* province; he and his staff unanimously declared that they were against the communist influence in the new revolutionary government. Then Fidel sent Camilo Cienfuegos, the chief of the Cuban Revolutionary Army, to *Camagüey* to speak to Hubert Matos. Camilo Cienfuegos, after one day or so, left *Camagüey* and went back to *Havana* in a little Cessna airplane with two other leaders and this plane never arrived in *Havana*. Then the newspapers said that Camilo Cienfuegos and his company were lost on the way. There was a very big search for Camilo Cienfuegos in the sea and rural areas from *Camagüey* to *Havana*, but they were never found. There were many opinions and comments about the situation. The general opinion of many people was that when Camilo Cienfuegos had his meeting with Hubert Matos, they agreed with some of Matos's points and, for that reason, in some way, that is why the plane was lost.

D: What happened to Hubert Matos?

R: One day after Camilo Cienfuegos was not found, Fidel went to *Camagüey* and everyone, I am exaggerating, came out to see him. He then went to the barracks with his army leaders and put Hubert Matos and his staff in jail. Then they were judged. This was a very difficult situation because Hubert Matos was loved by many Cubans. He had a T.V. in jail and saw that the people

were calling him a traitor to the revolution. After that, he and his staff were put before the court and the main idea was that he would be sentenced to death. But, in that situation, my opinion and, in general, that of the Cuban people, both revolutionary and not revolutionary, were against that. Because, at that moment, there were many ideas that there was a problem with the communists taking places in the government in a big way. Then, many Cubans did not agree with that and it was a very difficult situation. At that time, I was pastor in *Manzanillo*, where I was appointed during the annual conference of June, 1959. Hubert Matos's family was from *Manzanillo* and were very good Baptists. One of Hubert Matos's sisters was the wife of a Baptist pastor in *Oriente*. At that time, I learned that the family was having a difficult time and I visited them. His mother was a very, very nice Christian lady and she was an old woman that did not receive many visits. But, when she knew that I, as a pastor, was there, she wanted to spend time with me and I was with her in the room when Fidel was asking to have her son executed. I read the Bible with her, prayed with her, and at the end of my visit, this old, Christian woman said to me the sweetest words. She said to me, "Pastor, I know that maybe my son will be executed, but my prayer to God is that if Fidel executes him, God will use it for the good of the Cuban people." This was a very, very emotional moment for me. But, thanks be to God, many people said that the reaction of the Cuban people helped Hubert Matos to be sentenced to 30 years of jail or some very long jail term. I think that in 1981 or '83, at a time when Fidel agreed to free hundreds of thousands of the political prisoners, Matos was released. In my opinion he is alive and living here in the United States where he came immediately after he was freed. This was a very difficult time in our history but this was the situation.

D: Did you think at the time that this may be a positive for the Methodist Church? What did you think about the revolution and what it would mean for you, the Methodist Church, and the Cuban people?

R: I have a very clear memory of that time because it was a very emotional time. In the first place, when Batista left the country on January 1, 1959, I will say that at least ninety-five percent of the Cuban people were happy with the change because they did not like the Batista regime. They believed the words and the promise of Fidel when he said, "I am not a communist. The Cuban Revolution is of the Cuban Royal Palm." It was very green, the color green. But, many Cubans said in secret that the Cuban Revolution is as a melon, green on the outside and red on the inside.

D: In other words, there was a sense of fear and foreboding of what might come next?

R: Yes. But, of course, Fidel had a special talent of convincing people and the people thought that they would give him a chance, an opportunity.

D: Let me ask you another thing. If you think about Cuban history from 1900 or 1898 when the Americans took over and there wasn't much change, to 1933 when Batista and the sergeants took over during the election and there wasn't much change, and then in 1940 with Eddie Chibas when there was almost a time when there would be change, do you think it was almost inevitable that Castro would try his best to break away entirely from the United States? I think he had always argued, if I am not mistaken, that this was the only real way to change Cuba because the United States had always taken over and prevented real change.

R: My understanding is this. In the first place, when the Spanish-American War ended in 1898, the American army came to Cuba and took the power until May 20, 1902 when they handed over power to Estrada Palma, the first Cuban president. At that time, all the Cuban people recognized many, many good things that the American government made in Cuba. They worked very hard for the health situation of the Cuban people. They worked very hard for the education of the Cuban children, and they worked in a very, very good way. When I am telling this, this is not my opinion, since I was not born in that time, but everything that I heard from the time was that the Cuban people were very, very appreciate of the actions of the American government. The problem came when the Congress of the United States disclosed the future of Cuba and suggested that Cuba had its own government. There was a Senator, Dr. Platt, that did not agree with that and he put the Platt Amendment in and this was bad for the Cuban people.

D: But even after the Platt Amendment was abrogated, in 1934 I think it was, there was always the American economic control of many, many industries and much of the land. Whenever there would be political upheaval or concern about the government going too far with various things, the Americans would always be there to change it.

R: In my opinion there are two sides to this reality. On one side, most Cubans were in favor of the economic participation of the Americans in Cuba because the American enterprise offered the best salary for the Cuban people and they made a great contribution to the development of the Cuban economy in the sugar cane industry and so. There was also, of course, *Compañía de Cuba Electricidad*, the Cuban Electric Company from the United States that did very nice work, as well as the Cuban Telephone Company. They also started the railroads in Cuba. Then, at the beginning of the 1930s, the American government helped build the central highway of Cuba. In this sense, the Cuban people appreciated the participation of American enterprise in Cuba. However, in the political situation there was, in my opinion, some trouble because they had the right to intervene in Cuban politics and this was not made in agreement with the Cuban leaders, this was an American decision. Sometimes this did not happen in a very good way.

D: I guess what I was asking is, trying to think about the way Castro projected his decision making to the people. In other words, we had this relationship with the United States and we have never really been independent and now we are breaking with that. My hunch is that it is not just communism, but this is the best way to sever ties with the United States. My question is, do you think it was really communism that motivated this or was it mainly his determination to break the pattern that had developed?

R: I agree with the Cuban who said that the Castro Revolution was as a melon from the beginning; green on the outside, because otherwise he would not have taken the power, but inside, the red reality was present. Then, in my opinion, Fidel had his own mind for his revolution in a very specific way and he knew that he could not do it with American cooperation. He was very smart to profit, to . . .

D: He knew about the Cold War and the American and Russian conflict. He needed a shield and protector.

R: He knew that the communist system would give him a way to achieve. There were some anecdotes about Fidel. The people said that when he was a teenager studying in *Santiago de Cuba*, he wrote a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt asking him for twenty dollars.

D: So he never received the money and he was very angry at the United States?

R: Yes, because Roosevelt did not give him what he petitioned for. But, in my opinion, he managed the situation very well to make it appear that his communist orientation was the only way he could take because the American government did not support him. I think that he wanted the Soviet Union's support instead of American support, and, of course, if he had a connection and cooperation of the American government it would not have been possible for him to take over the American enterprise.

D: There is a characteristic in Latin-American history called the *caudillo*, strong leadership. Do you think that Fidel matches this idea like Simón Bolívar, Rosas, Perón, and Benito Juárez? Do you think he represents that tradition in Latin-America?

R: My personal opinion is that he wanted to be better than every one of them. His idea was to not only be the leader of all of Latin-America, but also all of **[end of side A]** Fidel had a big gathering in *Havana* in which three continents participated: Latin America, Asia, and Africa. He brought together the leaders to make a plan to work in all three continents. But, of course, being Fidel, he was the leader of everything. Now, after a little less than fifty years, the Cuban people know that Fidel's main interest was not the good of the Cuban people, but what was good for his ideals; to be a world leader.

D: As a young Methodist minister, were you afraid of what might come? Were you afraid that there may be a crackdown against religion? What were you thinking the first three months of 1959?

R: In those first three months, I was so emotional and excited like the majority of the Cuban people. I thought that the revolution was the best solution for Cuba because, in my opinion, even by using some socialistic way of work, not knowing the reality of Eastern Europe and Russia but thinking as a Cuban with my accounting mentality, I thought that one state organization that could manage the main industry would be a blessing. I thought it would reduce spending and propaganda and that it would be good because we would have enough things for the Cuban people: education, health care, clothing, shoes, and everything Cubans needed economically. Even when I knew that my contribution to the Cuban people was as a Christian pastor for the sake of their spiritual life, I thought that the revolution was the best thing for Cuba's economic and social situation. However, in 1960 and '61 when the executions took place, American enterprise was taken over, the banks and the sugar mills and so, and diplomatic ties with the United States were broken, many Cubans had a great fear. I thought that the communists would take a different way, but my main desire was to be with my people in Cuba until it was no longer possible for me. All national Cuban pastors felt the same way, but the difference between them and I was that they felt the need to escape at that time because tomorrow might be too late. My wife and I's position was that we recognized the danger but wanted to be faithful to God and stay there until the last day. God would take care of us in that situation. I did not think in my mind at

that time that I needed to worry, in my mind I wanted to be there. There was a time, in 1962, that we were afraid. We were afraid for the future of our children. This was a very difficult situation for us because we told ourselves that our children had to pay the price for our ministry and our decision. At that time, I'll confess to you, I was asking to leave the Country. My younger sister was in the United States and told me that she had all the money my family and I needed to leave the Country. We then prepared to leave the Country, but I did not have a visa so I could not leave. Then my wife and I were thinking that the only reason we would put the future of our children in danger was the Kingdom of God. We felt that we were making a bad decision for our children, but we stuck to our decision to remain in Cuba. The only reason we risked the future of our children was because of our ministry, our work, in Cuba. We then made a covenant with God and told him, "We will take care of your church here in Cuba but you must take care of our children and their future." I must tell you that this was the best agreement that we had in our life because, today, we have a wonderful family, five children, and every one of them are very, very faithful Christian leaders. One of them, Armando Jr., is a pastor here in Lakeland at Christ's Church. The youngest one, you knew during our trip to Cuba, Otto, has made a tremendous impact in Cuba with the young people. The three girls are doing very well. Alida, the oldest one in Toronto, Canada, graduated from Toronto University and she is working at Toronto University. She and her husband have done a wonderful job. Elina and Dorcas are living in Chicago and they are doing very, very well. We are very proud parents but recognize that everything has been done by our good and wonderful and marvelous God.

D: Well, let's go to June 1959. I guess we are six months into the revolution, but, even so, there is a very big Methodist annual conference. Where was that conference held?

R: This conference was held in *Santa Clara* in the church of our beloved leader, Dr. Angel E. Fuster and Bishop Roy Short. One year before, in 1958, our beloved Bishop John W. Branscomb died and Bishop Short was appointed to take care of us until the new bishop in Florida was assigned.

D: These were annual conferences in Cuba? Was this in *Havana*?

R: Every year, mostly in *Havana*, but also in *Matanzas* and *Camagüey*.

D: Were Americans in control of, and directing, the agenda of these conferences?

R: Yes, in some ways, but, at that time, there were also some very good Cuban leaders. The most visible of them was Dr. Angel Fuster, but we also had Rev. Luís Días de Arce, and Rev. Raziél Vasquez, who was a great pastor in Cuba. But, of course, sixty percent of our general budget in Cuba was paid by the Board of Missions out of New York City. We had about fifty-three or fifty-four American missionaries.

D: Would they be involved in this conference too?

R: Of course. There were a number of them that were district superintendents. For example, Rev. Victor Rankin and Dr. Carl D. Stewart.

D: They would serve in two different posts; they were a missionary and district superintendents?

R: District superintendents and local pastors in different churches. There were a large number of them that were working in the colleges we had in Cuba. In *Havana* we had Candler College, for the men, and Buena Vista College, for the women. In *Matanzas* we had Irene Toland College and in *Cienfuegos* we had Alisa Bowman College. In Camaguey was Pinson College. All of them were directed by American missionaries and there were many missionary teachers and other missionaries that worked in rural and agriculture. We had, at that time, fifty-three or fifty-four American missionaries, but, really, at that time, there was a large participation from the national leadership. Dr. Angel Fuster was the leader of a new commission we called the *Plan de Avancé*, the advance plan, which was approved at the conference in *Santa Clara* in June of 1959. This was a great, great plan. The plan . . .

D: Before we go further, was there a degree of excitement or enthusiasm greater than what you would have seen before the revolution? What do you think that their attitude was about the revolution at that point? Were they optimistic, afraid, or did they not think about it? Was there any discussion about what the revolution would mean for the movement or your church at that time?

R: I am sure that every one of them had their own idea and I am sure that some of them were [?], in one way or another. But, thanks be to God, they did not express their thoughts publicly. They affirmed that this was a Cuban affair and that they did not like to intervene in political matters. This was very wise of them.

D: Did you have any idea whether or not the Castro government, or whatever you want to call it since it wasn't a government yet, sent anyone to the conference or show interest in it?

R: I am sure that, even at that early time, they wanted to know everything that was going on but . . .

D: In other words, was there somebody there welcoming the delegates and outsiders that represented the regime?

R: Not officially, but they don't work officially.

D: Right, but there were people there telling about what was going.

R: Yes, but you must know another important point in the history. When Fidel Castro was a guerilla in *Oriente*, his son Fidelito was in a Methodist school in *Havana Central*. This was not a college but a school. Would you like to know more?

D: Sure.

R: Fidelito is in a picture in the Cuban Methodist magazine with a group of teenagers that were baptized in the Methodist church in *Havana*. Somebody told me that after Fidel won the revolution, he was speaking with Fidelito, a young teenager at that time, and Fidelito asked his father what his religion was and Fidel answered, "Oh, my religion is your religion." (laughter)

D: Castro was divorced by that time and his ex-wife was raising the child?

R: Right, but in my opinion he agreed that he wanted to have his son in a very good place and agreed that Fidelito would go to a Methodist school. You know, I was with Fidel on two or three occasions. One of them was in 1980, the first time Jesse Jackson was a presidential candidate. Fidel invited all the leaders of the different churches to participate in many of the activities with Jesse Jackson. The first time that Fidel went in a church after he took power was at the University Methodist Church in *Havana*. Jesse Jackson had a sermon in an ecumenical gathering that we had in the *Calle K # 502, Vedado, Habana* Methodist facility. Before this, Jesse Jackson was with Fidel in a gathering with the Havana University students. We, in the Methodist church, were waiting for Jesse Jackson and the diplomatic process and when the time came we all waited in the main door of the church for Jesse Jackson. Since Jesse Jackson was a presidential candidate in the United States, all the secret services from the United States and many newspaper reporters were there in Havana with him. We knew that our sanctuary in the *Verdado* was under the control of the Cuban secret police and American secret services to protect the life of Jesse Jackson. Everything was very quiet, but within five or ten minutes before the arrival of Jesse Jackson, we saw there was some movement because some of them ran to another place and we did not know what was happening. A few minutes after that we saw a group of people coming down the street from Havana University to our church and, in front of this group of people, was Jesse Jackson and Fidel Castro. There was no diplomatic welcome to Jesse Jackson. They quickly went to the temple and so. Then, we had an unexpected visitor in that service; Fidel Castro. We had the program. This was my office, my church, and I was leading the service, the ecumenical service, and then, someone, I don't know who, asked Fidel if he would like to say some words to the congregation. He said a few words, but very wise words. He said,

“Well, I am here not because I am a specialist in prayer and sermons. But, I would like to say to all of you that I am very happy to be here because here is a very special and great leader of the American people, Jesse Jackson.”

His words were received very well. When the service finished, Fidel came to me and asked me in a very anxious way, “Are there any Catholic priests here?” I told him, “Yes, there is Archbishop Jaime Ortega and Father Carlos Manuel de Cespedes.” I brought him to them and I suppose that he made an excuse to them because he was, for the first time, not in a Catholic church but in an Evangelical church. On another occasion, he asked the Ecumenical Council of Evangelical Churches in Cuba if we could be with him. He liked to be with us before the Catholic leaders because he was happy with the Evangelical church and he had some trouble with the Catholic leaders. There were some Catholic gatherings around the world, I don't know where, and he asked the Catholic leaders to meet with him before they went to these gatherings. He asked us to meet with the thirteen of us, the leaders of the different churches, and we had a pretty good interview with him.

D: Did this meeting happen that day or at a later time?

R: No, no this happened maybe six months later.

D: That event, with Jesse Jackson, was kind of an ice-breaking kind of thing which created this dialogue then?

R: In my opinion, at the beginning of 1980 with the visit of Jesse Jackson to Cuba, even when I know that he had some trouble in his personality and so, I can tell you that his visit to Cuba at that time made a great, great contribution to the relationship between the Evangelical church, Fidel, and the government. There were also other important circumstances. Frei Betto, a Brazilian, Catholic priest, wrote a book, *Fidel y la Religion, Fidel and the Religion*. The visit of Jesse Jackson to Cuba, the visit of Fidel to our service, and this book made a great contribution to a new epoch between the state and church relationship.

D: Now that we are on that subject, can you go ahead and tell us about what happened and transpired in that meeting that happened six months later? Who was represented in the meeting?

R: I was there, as the bishop of the Methodist Church, the bishop of the Episcopal Church, the president of the Ecumenical Council, and the leaders from other churches. I am sure that not all of the leaders from all the churches were there, but the main churches were there.

D: Were the Catholics involved at all?

R: No, no this was evangelical only because when he called us, the evangelical people in Cuba, he had some trouble with the Catholics and he turned to our part. This happened all of the time. For example, he received the Pope's visit in 1998 in a very nice way, but, in our opinion, after that he liked to say in some way to the Catholics that they were not the only ones. In my opinion, I was out of Cuba at that time because I left Cuba in 1990, I heard that he promoted activities for the Evangelical Churches just like the Catholic Churches and finished with a big evangelical service in the *Plaza de la Revolución* in which he was present. In my opinion, he liked to say to the Catholics on that occasion that they were not the only ones. In my opinion, God uses everything in this life for the good of His kingdom and the people.

Now, in the meeting with the thirteen us and Fidel, there was Fidel, Dr. José Filípe Carneado, the chief of the office for religious matters in the central committee of the party, and there were two or three other party leaders at that meeting. This was a very open and busy gathering. Fidel told us at the beginning, in his official office, that he was very happy with this meeting because the Catholic Church, at many times, did very bad things against the revolution, but the evangelical people did good things and were very nice people. For example, we told our members to be an example in every place; in school, at work, and so. Then he said that he was sorry that he made decisions that injured, not only the Catholic Church, but all of us, and he asked us to forgive him for that. Then he asked me, "Bishop, what is the difference between the Adventist Church and the Methodist Church?" He was walking around the group which was seated at a big table and talking with us in a very, very good atmosphere; But, of course, without any results.

D: When you say result, you mean reaction from you or follow-up from Fidel.

R: Follow-up for good resolutions and to solve the many, many problems that we had. I would like to add a comment about the way the Evangelical Churches worked and the way that the Catholic Churches worked. In my opinion, we, the Evangelical Churches and leaders, needed to learn a lot from the Catholic Church. Why, because they are specialists in diplomacy and negotiation. For example, every time an important person from the Vatican visited Cuba it was not spontaneous. The leader of the Catholic Church prepared this meeting many months in advance, they spoke with the Cuban revolutionary leaders about the agenda, and they planned their agenda with a specific topic that they would negotiate and discuss. We, the Evangelical Churches, had a visit from the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, we had a visitor from the Council of Bishops here in the United States, and we had some contact with leaders of the revolution, but we did not make any plans in advance. For example, on one occasion, at the beginning of my episcopacy in Cuba, we were totally isolated in Cuba. We did not receive any visitors from outside, any literature from the outside, any counsel from the outside, and then the leader from the General Board of Global Ministry in New York visited Cuba. They had a plan for a group of leaders from different Evangelical Churches to visit Cuba as a group but they did not have permission or visas for the group. A leader of our church in New York, by mistake, Miss Joyce Hill, sent her petition by herself. The American government and Cuban government granted her permission and she came to Cuba for the first time. We had a meeting with our cabinet and leaders and shared with her many things. I asked her if she would like to make a courtesy visit to Dr. Camiado in the office of religious matters in the central committee, and she said, "Oh, o.k." Dr. Camiado, who was a very cultural person and very wise man, spoke with us and at the end of the visit he asked Joyce Hill, "Well, Joyce, please tell me what I can do for you? What would you like to ask me?" Her answer was, "Thank you Dr. Camiado. I have nothing to ask you." I was totally disappointed because, before the meeting, she did not ask me what the needs of the Methodist Church in Cuba were so that she could defend or ask for them if she had the opportunity. After the meeting, and in all the visits that she and other leaders of the ministry and church in the United States made to Cuba, they never asked us what they could ask of the government in our favor. The Catholic Church worked in the very best way. Of course, the government did them everything, but in every occasion they had some result. However, in the Methodist Church, during the evangelical gathering with Fidel, no one asked for anything. Even on two other occasions, more or less everything happened in the same way. I had a different jobs in the Council of Evangelical Churches in Cuba, I was president, I was at another time executive secretary, I was treasure, and I was at all of the gatherings with all the visitors that we had. The Cuban Ecumenical Council of Churches had a good project that, especially in the 1980s, sent some Cuban engineers and other specialists in agriculture and other specialties to Cambodia. They were paid by the Church World Service in New York. I thought this was a very nice project because we worked in cooperation with the government and the Cambodian government in a very positive way, working for the benefit of the people. At one moment, we received an important group of visitors from the United States. In this group was the vice president of the Ford Motor Company. We had a meeting with this group of people. Before we went to speak to the government leaders, this man, a wonderful Methodist Christian, asked us what way they could help the different Evangelical churches in Cuba, but the response of one of our leaders was, "No thanks, we don't need any help." This disappointed me a lot.

D: Meanwhile, you had a lot of ideas?

R: Of course, but in another situation when the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Emilio Castro, a Uruguayan Methodist, was planning to come to Cuba. Before his visit we met with the other leaders to plan the visit and I asked them if we could make a list of different things that we could negotiate with Emilio Castro and present them to the government. They did not give me a specific answer but, after that, because of the way the government worked in Cuba, many leaders of the different churches felt that I, Bishop Rodriguez, wanted to profit from the visit of Emilio Castro for some personal reason. Then I understood that the other leaders did not like to work like we needed to work. When Emilio Castro visited with us, the only thing that these leaders presented to him was the possibility of support for the retired Cuban pastors from the revolutionary government. The Cuban pastors were supported by the Church, not by the government, and we did not have any retirement from the government like Social Security here in the United States. For me, this was insignificant because this worked to benefit the group of pastors, not the benefit of all the churches and the Cuban people. However, I accepted this reality and was very frustrated.

D: This will conclude today and next time we will begin our discussion with the June annual conference in 1959.