

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: I'm beginning today once again, a new day with Armando Rodriguez, and this is May 30th, and today we're going to begin talking about the 1970s and the history of the time that you were Bishop. Can you go ahead and just kind of introduce the 1970's to us and mention what you were thinking and what you were involved in, in 1970, in earliest months of 1970 and then we can go on from there.

R: OK. Of course, our autonomy was in 1968 and we worked strongly in all the aspects of our church, and especially with the spiritual aspect of our church in the middle of our political situation. And thanks be to God, we had had a wonderful development in this aspect. I will say that, everyday our Cuban Methodist church was more evangelical, more evangelizing, working to have more converts and we, many of our pastors had a wonderful development in their spiritual and theological situation, and there was a group of lay pastors that had a special experience with the holy spirit. We will not say charismatic experience because in Cuba we were isolated completely, and we didn't have any influence from this movement outside Cuba, but they had more or less the same experience that in other countries, for example, they had the experiencing of spoken tongues

D: Speaking in tongues

R: Yes, and then, they had a very special evangelizing zeal, *celo evangélico* and then, they were very good in their prayer, Bible reading and pastoral work. Their congregation grew more than the other congregation, and so, and we were happy with that situation, but in the end, more or less about the year 1973, the situation was a little out of control, and they were doing things by themselves, and they didn't obey our disciplinary action and our structure; they like to work by themselves, not by the guidelines of the annual conference and the Bishop, and in that Annual Conference we had a very bad situation. A group of them, in one session of our Annual Conference, they spoke and said that they will be out of the Methodist church. This made a great impact on our people, because we were, as I told many times, a very united church and we accepted one another in their own way of thinking or political matter, and so, but this was a very upset situation.

D: Let me make sure I understand what was happening. When you became autonomous there were people within the church and there were individual congregations that became evangelical, far more charismatic than was the norm, than was generally done at the time, and they began to get more out of control,

R: Yes.

D: and as time went on, there was a concern that they were moving too far away from the original, from the Methodist church, and they were not under any kind supervision, adequate supervision

R: Yes

D: Correct. And did they have, did they have leaders that emerged in this movement?

R: Yes, of course. They had a special person, one wonderful lay pastor. His name is Ariel Gonzalez, and he was the leader of this group, and he was a person through whom God made a lot of miracles, and he was a wonderful pastor. But, in my opinion, the problem was that he thought by himself. *En español decimos: él se endiosó.* He believed that he was a God. And this made very bad situation. We called them to have discussion to speak about the problem, but the final action of them was to resign from the Methodist church. This was, as I told you, a very bad experience for us, that we had always a very united thinking and we heard every different opinions in social, political or theological matter, but in that occasion, we were in front of a group with very solid point of view, and they were not open to hear the other person. Then, in the beginning there were about 10 pastors involved in this situation. But thanks be to God, when we spoke with each one of them, only three of them, Ariel Gonzalez, the leader, Luis Perez, and another. Ariel Gonzalez was pastor in the church of *Omaja*, in *Oriente*, and Luis Perez was the pastor in *Gibara*, in *Oriente* also, and Walby Leyva was pastor in one of the churches in *Camagüey*; they, the three of them, decided to be out of the Methodist church. Until now this will be fine, because every person, every pastor, has the right to decide, to take their own decision. But the problem was that they, they met themselves, and they made some plan of action, and we discovered that the government was in their matter, in their situation. For example, one day I understood that the government granted them a permission to have a gathering of all the followers that they had in the church in *Omaja* where Ariel was pastor, and this was unusual for us, because the government granted the permission when one legal church, a church that was recognized by the government asked for that permission for that gathering. And the government didn't recognize new churches and new groups. For that reason we asked: "what happened here that they are a group of three pastors having trouble with us, they are not legally recognized in the government, how they had the permission?" But the answer was that the government liked to support them and to put them against us.

They liked to support them and to put them against us, and then, this was the reason why they had the permission to have a gathering any time that they liked, even in different places where they had groups of follower members, they broke our chapel and sanctuary

and they had their own service. And we went before the authority and asked to not permit that, but this was impossible. They, they did anything that they liked to do, and this created a great division and suffering for us Methodist pastors.

D: Now did that mean that you lost those churches, because they were the leaders that you've lost them?

R: No. We had services with the people who were not their followers.

D: So the churches essentially divided, as they do today.

R: Yes, they had different days, different hours, their service and we had our service, but it was impossible for us to stop this situation. We prayed and we worked and we visited these communities, these local churches, and we worked in the best way, and then, in the continuation of the year, they lost everything. Maybe around two years later they had only a few followers, because they understood that they were wrong in their way, but this was a very difficult time for us, because the government lacked also, in some way, to use this reality in front of myself. In other words, if we accepted the help of the government authority, they would finish immediately this situation. However, if I agreed to have this support, I was sure that would have to pay a price that I was not ready to pay. Because in that way, I would need to help them in many other situations and I would have lost my main orientation, my main work in the church. Of course, this problem, the main concern that I had in that time before this problem was that we didn't have the same experience that the Methodist church in Chile had in 1920s or 1930s. They had the same problem. Some of their pastors had some charismatic experiences and they had a very big congregation and they were out of the Methodist church, but of course, in my opinion, they had no other interests, or political interests, or, in other words, the political situation in Chile in that time, was different from our political situation that also was a problem in the internal life of the Methodist church in Cuba, but they had in Chile a bad experience: the people who remained in the Methodist church and were not part of the *Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal*, as the name came to be recognized, they had one theological difficulty: that the group of members that were faithful to the Methodist church and not to the Methodist Pentecostal church, they had the opinion that any person who has a good prayer life, any person who has some revival in their faith, some persons who read the Bible, this would not be a Methodist person, and this was, in my opinion, very, very bad for them, because they didn't look for the help of God. In our situation, it was the contrary. The members who remained faithful to the Methodist church, they thought that this group of dissidents had some very good experience and then they, the members who remained as Methodists, they needed that experience. Then, in the group of our Methodist church who remained faithful to our Methodist church, they developed one spiritual atmosphere, they prayed more, they read the Bible more, and they liked to have the evangelical experience, but under the control that John Wesley taught us in the beginning: we must have a spiritual strength but we must be under the control of our life and our action and everything. In that situation, as in many other realities, God worked for good in our difficulty, because we lost three pastors and maybe about 200 members of different churches, but we had one vision about what we must be as Methodists: we must

be faithful Christians, we must have a strong prayer life, we must read more the Bible and our pastors and members must be more active in the task of bringing other people to Christ. It was very interesting for me that one of the local churches that was under the pastor Luis Perez, one of the dissidents who never came back to the Methodist church, was the church where Ricardo Pereira, the current Bishop of the Methodist Church in Cuba and a person who God is using in a very, very great way, he was in one of these congregations, and he was at that time about 15 or 16 years old, but the family and other members told me that they went to some rural area to pray and to ask God to guide them about what they must do in that confrontation and God guided them to remain in the Methodist Church and to work in the Methodist Church and to work for more spiritual blessing in their life. Then, about 1 or 2 years after that, when Ricardo Pereira was a 17 year-old young person he came to my office and told me that he'd like to be a Methodist pastor. In that time we had a plan for the young persons who had this experience. We called them *Misioneros Laicos* (Lay Missionaries) and we gave to them one month of training, guiding them on how to have a service, how to be a pastor in a rural area, and in that way he began in the ministry of the Methodist Church and as the history shows, in 1999, about 25 or 26 years after that, he was elected the Bishop of the Methodist Church and he has been re-elected two times more and I thought that he will be re-elected more times. Then, we suffered a lot with that division with this dissident group, but as in all the other realities of our church, God made the problem and the suffering that we had in every situation and in every place of our Methodist history of that time, an instrument of blessing and growth. We praise the Lord because he remains the Lord of the Church and in the end, even when we the human beings make mistakes, He always does the best, when He knows that our heart is faithful to Him and we want the best for Him and His church. We thank God for this difficult experience that remained in the church for 2 or 3 years and we lost, for example, the parsonage in *Omaja*, where Ariel Gonzalez lived, he never gave back this house to the Methodist Church. We lost many things, but we gained a lot of things also with the grace of God.

D: OK, our next subject is the CIEMAL, is that how you pronounce it?

R: Yes, CIEMAL.

D: Can you tell us about your involvement in that and what that is, what that stands for?

R: CIEMAL: C, I, E, M, A, L significa *Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Metodistas en América Latina*, Council of Evangelical Methodist Churches in Latin America and then I was of course member of the College of Bishops of Latin America Methodist Churches and the Methodist Church [in Cuba] worked together with the other Latin American Methodist Churches.

D: When was this organization started? What year?

R: This organization started in 1969 in Brazil and this was more or less 1975 or so, when they decided to make three regional [areas of] work: North, the Mountain and then the South Cone. We, the Methodist churches in Mexico, Central America, Caribbean, Puerto

Rico and Cuba, we were the North region of CIEMAL. Then we decided to have in Jamaica one special gathering with all the leaders of the different Methodist churches in our area and this was wonderful, because, for the first time, we met with the leaders of the Methodist church in the Caribbean that were Methodist churches organized by the England Methodist church. Of course we didn't have so many contacts with them, because, we, the other Methodist churches, we were part of the United States' missionary work. But we had in Kingston, Jamaica, a wonderful gathering with about 5 or 6 leaders of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas in the English Methodist churches in the Island with the leaders in Panama, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba and other churches. In that occasion, in that gathering, we, by ourselves, we agreed to begin some missionary work for ourselves in a country without any Methodist presence, and we selected the Republic of Colombia as our missionary point. And this was a very nice experience for me. I was the leader or president of the committee that was in charge of starting the Methodist Church in Colombia and Bishop Mora, from Mexico was the vice-president. The president Smith from Panama, because at that time Panama did not have a Bishop, but rather a President of the Church who was the treasurer [of the committee] and then the leader in Puerto Rico and other church was member of that committee. This was a great challenge. We wanted to do by ourselves, with our own people, a new missionary enterprise, a new missionary work in other country such as Colombia, that don't have Methodist presence, and our vision was to do an integral evangelization. What does this mean? That we will start the Methodist Church there; we will do evangelistic work, but at the same time, we will do as John Wesley taught us, social work, and specially, we had one special goal with the illiterate people in Colombia. I'd like to tell you that this was a great experience because I, as leader moderator of that committee, I participated in a big deal in that project and this is very interesting for me, because in my opinion, it was the first time that a socialistic government permits one national leader to work establishing other church in a different country. This was a great miracle, a great experience for me, and of course, all the Methodist churches in Cuba were involved in this missionary enterprise and this was a great blessing for us. We began to preach and we started churches in different regions of Colombia, for example in Bogota, the capital, also in *Villa Vicencio* and two other different places, because our vision was to start the work in different geographical places, and after that, to work to gain all the Colombian people for God. In the same time, we began to have one big project of literacy, and then we started a committee with people from Colombia, they were all Colombians, and we started the literacy program in the four important regions of Colombia: in the big capital, Bogota, in the coffee region, in the cow region and then in little town in the rural area. We had the support of Bread For The World, *Pan Para El Mundo*, one German organization which supported us for 1 or 2 years and this permitted us to develop a wonderful job. We trained the people from each one of these areas on how to teach to read and write, and then we had gatherings when we finished. Some time, in more or less 6 months, we had a gathering to review how the work was, and we met with the people who were in the literacy program and we has also some of the people who learned how to read and write. I remember one special young person who was one of the more excellent students and he was happy in our evaluation meeting and I asked him what is your purpose in your life? I suppose you'd like to be a medical doctor or an engineer or so to go from the rural area to other big city and to have a wonderful new

economic life, and immediately he answered “No, my wish is to be a well prepared person, but to remain in my own rural community and to help other people in my area.” This made me full of joy because I thought that this was the goal, the purpose of that, and all the church work must be the transformation of each community where we are working, but the honeymoon of this work finished after two years of so.

D: The honeymoon?

R: The honeymoon. I don’t know why, but the Cuban government that had granted me the visa every time that I had to go to work there, they stopped giving me the visa, and in the same time, in that occasion, we began to have some big difficulties with our brothers in the General Board of Global Ministries. They were against this work. Why? I don’t understand why because we were doing the missionary work. We were doing the same work that John Wesley did in the beginning of the Methodist Church, not only working for the spiritual salvation of the person, but also, to help them in a social education and economical situation. In my opinion, there were two or three reasons why the General Board of Global Ministries was against this type of work that we were doing by ourselves: in the first place, they don’t like to have this work without their directive; in the second place, because they knew that we, the Cuban Methodists, we were Evangelical, not political, we didn’t have political interests, and then, they will be very happy, in my personal opinion, if we were in the same political line with them. But they don’t like to cooperate. They criticized us for doing that work and what they said was that the Methodist Church had an agreement with the Presbyterian Church in the beginning of the 20th Century, that the Methodist Church will not work in Colombia. That this was a territory for the Presbyterian Church. I explained to them that I understood this agreement in that time, in the beginning of the Century, when there was the beginning of the work in different places in Latin America and this was a good agreement for that time, but in that time, in 1970s, there was about twenty five or thirty millions of Colombian people and the Presbyterian Church had maybe 50 or 100 churches; that there was a big, big opportunity and places for the Methodists and other churches. But, in my personal opinion, their problem was not what kind of church we were doing, but the emphasis, the evangelical and spiritual emphasis that we were giving to [our work].

D: The spiritual emphasis they disagreed with in that regard?

R: Yeah. For one reason or another, I was not able to go more times to Colombia and the work remained without any support in their place. But my understanding is that right now there is a Methodist Church organized there in Colombia and I heard that the Bishop of the Methodist Church in Colombia that we started 30 years ago was in the last General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas.

D: OK.

R: This experience that we can call controversial and we didn’t expect to have was the beginning of our difficulties and bad relationship with the General Board of Global Ministries. The secretary...

D: Make sure we understand here. The General Board of Global Ministries of the Methodist Church was one of many different types of churches that were involved in that process, so it was not just the Methodist church, it was the Presbyterian, it was the Episcopal...

R: No, this is the general agency, when we say general is not a conference agency, it's not jurisdictional agency, but a general, meaning for all the United States and all the world.

D: But not just Methodist.

R: But just Methodist.

D: Oh, just Methodist?

R: Just Methodist.

D: It was just Methodist?

R: Yes, Methodist.

D: OK, ok. Just wanted to make sure we understand that. OK, good.

R: But in the Discipline of the United Methodist Church said that the General Board of Global Ministries is the channel for the relationship between the United church in the USA and the Methodist church, autonomous or not autonomous in the other countries around the world. That means that our connection, the channel for our relationship between the Methodist Church in Cuba and the Methodist Church in the USA all must be done through the General Board of Global Ministries. But they had – this is my personal opinion; maybe I am wrong—but my personal opinion is that they were not interested in the spiritual and evangelical work of the Methodist church. They had a special emphasis in social, political and economical issues, but we agreed that the church must do both work. But the main and the first task is the evangelistic and spiritual task and as a result of this Christian experience, we will do social work in the name of God as John Wesley did it. But they don't have the same opinion, and then in my personal understanding is, that they liked to have all their work social, political and economical contribution with some input for the left work. And the left work means not pastoral and evangelistic work, but only to do social work as other agencies do, who are not Christian. The Leon organization, or the United Nations organization and so; and we have other position, other opinion. Also, in some way, I received the impression that they will be very happy with us if we represented their point of view, I mean the social, economical and political position. But this was not our understanding. Our understanding was that we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ, ambassadors of God's kingdom on the earth and our main mission is to preach the gospel. And for that reason, they didn't give us any economical support, etc. because they didn't agree with our theological position, but more than that,

we suffered a lot in this reality because they liked to have in our Methodist Church in Cuba people who had the same opinion and the same point of view that they had, and in this way, I can say that we in Cuba, that had had one united church accepting the personal point of view of every one of our members, of our leaders, they put some factor of division in our people in Cuba. I mean that they had some special person in Cuba to whom they supported economically. They had communications between them and they used them for more trouble, internal trouble in the United Methodist Church in Cuba. In the future we will explain a little more about that reality, but this was other of our disappointment, because we were struggling to maintain the Methodist Church in Cuba with strong spiritual life in front of our communist government who didn't have the same interest, but now we have other different struggle: the people in New York that we expected to support us, not only economically but by prayer, by moral support, etc., they were, I would be able to say, they were our enemy, enemy in our own home. This was very frustrating and we had different gatherings in Cuba and we discussed that, and we explained our point and so, but never, never in the time that the same group of leaders had the responsibility in the Latin American desk in the General Board of Global Ministries we had the same situation without any solution. I don't know about other regions because they have other desks for Africa, for Asia and other regions, but here, for us in Latin America, we had I can say, enemies, not friends in that desk, but thanks be to God, as our Cuban Methodist people learned to struggle and to be alive in front of our political troubles with our government, we learned how to maintain ourselves in a victorious way only with the support and the guidance of God. For us, only God was our support, but the only support of God is enough to do his work and to be victorious in all our ministry. I think that in that occasion also, our struggle, our difficulty, made us more strong in our vision, in our spiritual life, in our understanding about what was the will of God for us in Cuba, and I will repeat one time more: in my opinion, for that blessing experience in that controversial situation, this prepared the Methodist church in Cuba to have right now a great revival and growth that they are having, because we only asked for the support and the help and company of God and we will not be against the help of other humans, but this is a secondary position. The main and the principal necessity that we have is the support and blessing and presence of the holy spirit that is coming from God and He is very, very good with us and with other people who are looking for that.