

**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 June 3<sup>rd</sup> and I'm here once again with Armando Rodriguez and we are beginning a new day and today we are going to begin to talk about your involvement in the Christian Conference for Peace.

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

D: How many people were at these gatherings?

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

D: So Americans also participated in this?

R: Yes, some Americans. Because there were very honest leaders who liked to know and to see by firsthand how was the matter, the meeting and so and so, and I ...

D: And so they were allowed to participate by the Russians.

R: Of course.

D: And the Russians were always overseeing everything I guess...

R: Yes, they had the direction in all the situations.

D: And so it might be surprising to people that the Russian Orthodox Church was operational, was actually going, was actually working and running. Was that in your mind always the case or did it just begin only recently?

R: You mean running in the same direction that the Soviet political?

D: Yes.

R: Yes, the leader of the Orthodox Church that participated in this organization, I am sure that they were leaders that were very well connected with the soviet government. Some people said that all of them participated in the KGB, but they were human beings, they said that they were Christian and they were looking for what will be the contribution of the Christian churches and the Christian people in the problem that we had worldwide, specially the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. This was a great, great blessing for me in many ways, because in this meeting, I can say that I had three, four different situations: in the first place, I participated in all the meetings; in the second place, I heard everything that everyone said, but of course with a mind of interpreting the position of the person and so and so, and then I spoke very, very little. I heard a lot but I spoke very little.

D: So there would have been representatives from Russia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and all the socialist countries in Europe. And then I made my own conclusion and ...

D: Can I ask you what was the level of participation of the Catholic Church in those countries, like in Poland for example. Did they send Catholic priests?

R: Really the leaders of the Catholic Church had very little participation.

D: So this was all Protestants except for the Russian Orthodox?

R: Yes, protestants and Russian Orthodox. They had Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and many other countries, but the Vatican didn't participate officially in that gathering. Then there were mainly protestant and Orthodox churches that belonged to this organization. Of course, they selected the representation by themselves. Of course people who were in the same direction that they had and so. But this was a great experience for me because some times, some of the leaders in the country where we had the gathering, some leader invited me to be with them visiting local churches, and for example, the Arch-Bishop *Nicodine* in that time, the Archbishop of Kharkiv in Ukraine, he invited me and other little group of delegates to visit his diocese and this was a great experience for me, because we visited in a day 4 or 6 congregations in different cities and towns and was very interesting for me to see the real Russian people, how they feel, how they were living, and how was their character, and I can say to you that I saw the Orthodox real Russian people as the same in other countries. When we visited them in the local churches they received us in every place with bread and salt. And they said that the bread and the salt are the main element of life and they liked to bring us the best of the life, and they were very humble people, very sincere Christian and so, and I like to tell you that when the Orthodox church, of course the government closed in Russia a lot of sanctuaries and temples, but the churches in Russia, when they had the special services that was for me very, very interesting, for example, they don't use benches, *bancos* where people sit down.

D: Pews?

R: Pews, and chairs. All the congregation was on foot and then the service was for more than 2 hours and very, very liturgical, but the faith of these gatherings, of course the majority of them I am sure that in that congregation were some secret police, and so and so, but in general, you were able to see the faithfulness of the people, and so. This was a great experience for me. Of course, we the visitors were treated in a very special way, and of course, they brought chairs for us to sit down in this large service that they had. And then, there was very interesting study that we had. In my opinion, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were the churches and the people that were not very close to the Soviet Union system. For example, in one occasion...

D: They seemed to be more independent?

R: More independent. They had even theologically and historically their own position different than the official position of the Russians and so. In my opinion the country that was more close to everything to the Russian was the Bulgarian country, and of course, the leader of the Orthodox in Bulgaria, they were always very, very close to the thought of the Russian Orthodox leaders. Then...

D: Now would these trips be annual trips, every year?

R: Every year more than one time. Maybe 2 or 3 times in a year, because we had the general gathering, the committee gathering and so. And this was a special blessing for me because I learned a lot from them.

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

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

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

R: Well, in Cuba we had only one gathering of that organization. This was, I don't remember what year, in 1970s and this was in a hotel in *Varadero* beach, of course, and we had a gathering there. But some of the leaders personally visited Cuba some times, and as I told you, the Archbishop *Nicodem* from the Kharkiv Diocese in the Russian Orthodox church, he was a very humble, very open person, and he and myself, we were born in the same year, we had the same age, and we established a pretty good relationship, fraternal relationship, and he was very kind with me and so.

One of my special privileges, in one meeting, was to meet with some youth leaders from the Methodist Church in Estonia, and he was a wonderful Christian, very faithful Christian, and he loved a lot the Methodist Church, but, of course, in the first place to God and in the second place in the Methodist Church, but he told me the difficulties that the Methodist church in Estonia had in the past. When the Stalinist period, there was a great, great persecution against the Christian churches in all the socialist countries in eastern Europe, and he told me that the leaders of the Methodist church in Estonia, he was in jail for many times in a work camp in the Stalinist work that this means, maybe worse than the Nazis work camp. And why was he there? Because the official strategy of the Russian and Soviet people was to have in every country one official church and only one official church that they can manage better. They didn't like in Estonia to have Methodist churches and other denominational churches. And then this leader who was a saint, a real saint, he didn't agree to participate in another church. He liked to remain as Methodist. And for that reason he and other leaders of the other denominations, they were put in jail in the concentration camp, and he thought—this Methodist leader—that the only way he could survive would be escaping from this camp, and one time he escaped from his concentration camp. But he was recaptured and this young person told me: why was he not dead by the police who captured him? Because he was found by the police belonging to other concentration camp. The police of his own concentration camp did not pick him up. He said to me, if the police from his concentration camp would have pick him up, he would be dead, he would be shot. But as he was found by the police in other concentration camp, they don't have any problem and then they maintained their life. For

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

D: I know this may be difficult for you, but when did things become easier or more open or more tolerated in the Eastern Bloc for religion? Most people would be surprised, probably, to learn that the Russian Orthodox church had this organization operating. Most people might think that particularly, up to the time of Stalin in 1953 when he died, before that time, there would have been no Orthodox church even in existence any longer. Would that be incorrect that the Orthodox Church in Russia existed even under Stalin?

R: I think that the Orthodox Church in Russia is very strong, and in my opinion, they had in a big amount the same situation that we had in Cuba, and I suppose in other communist countries. They had leaders in the churches, but are in a big commitment with them. I heard that some people thought that the main leader in the Russian Orthodox Church was a member of the KGB, maybe because this was the only way that he can do his work in the church. I don't like to judge him, but in that way, having leader that was faithful to the Soviet system, the government had the opportunity to put in some position in the church the people that they liked to have, that politically had more influence than the leader of the church.

D: So the situation in Russia was that even though after the Revolution in 1917 the communist party made war on the church and persecuted the church, they could not destroy the church, and they accepted that there would be one, but they would control it. They understood they could not destroy it.

R: Yeah, because...

D: And they harassed people that probably attended the church and treated them badly and that kind of thing, but they really understood that they could not entirely destroy it.

R: I will not say they understood, but they thought that they can destroy all the church.

D: Eventually, it would just go away.

R: Yes, but you know the church belongs to God and then in all the situations, with the Nazism, Sovietism, or other *ism* the church is always a faithful remnant to God, but in my personal opinion, maybe, the Russian Orthodox church organized and participated in this kind of organization because it was one way in more or less, a Christian way to be present in the reality of the life of their nation and the world-wide situation and then, at least they said “we are a Christian organization.” At least they had service in that gathering; at least they are speaking in the name of God and so. I think that they made this effort because this was a way for them to testify outside the world of the church, of the sanctuary, and this is the same situation that we had in Cuba. The government had leaders in the ecumenical organization that they are very close to the government and their policies. But, and also, they worked in every national denomination, they worked in every local church to do their work against God and the work of the church. And they had some victory because some pastors, some leaders, some members obeyed their purpose, but thanks be to God, in every nation, in every local church, God maintained a group of remnant people who were faithful to Him and obeyed Him. Of course, the strategy of the communist leader, the communist party, the government is that in the future, they will get their goal that no church, but even I think, they don’t like in this history time, that there is not a church in every communist country, but they liked to have a church that are very close to the government, a church that does everything that they say, because they liked to have the impression world-wide, that the Christian and the Church has a place in the communist and the socialist country, but they liked to have a church very close to them, that obeys them. But God is great and I can tell you for myself and many other realities and people that they cannot have the victory, and in the Cuban situation, as you see, Cuba has socialistic government for near [60 years]

[TAPE 14, SIDE A]

D: We were talking about the fate of the Cuban church in the face of the Socialist system in Cuba.

R: And their struggle against the church. And so we can repeat that the [Cuban] government had many, many problems with the economical situation, with the international atmosphere and so, and in many occasions, God used this economical and international problems to keep the communist leaders occupied, and in that way they cannot work everything that they’d like to do against the church and the Christians and I can tell you my brother, that to experience these struggles, to participate in all these socialistic and communist processes but being faithful to God and having care from God, this is the biggest experience that we had. I consider myself a privileged person, because I had these experiences, I confronted these struggles with the enemy of God and the church. In reality, when I saw my past, my life, I thanked God in a very, very great way for my time, my experience, my situation in the Cuban situation, because this has told me that if we are faithful to God, He will take care of us in the bad and in the good situation and in some occasion you asked me how it was possible for you to survive in that struggle? And I forgive you, because you who don’t have this experience that I had to live in this very, very hard and bad situation, we had experiences that we could only have in these situations. And you can think that I was very privileged person, why? Because I was in jail only for some days, but we have in Cuba the political prisoners who are in jail

for 10, 15, 20, 29 years, and I cannot understand how they are surviving this situation, even when they don't have the Christian experience that I had and all the Christian persons have, but of course, it's the grace of God, it's God taking care of them, because sees our heart, and when He sees that there is a person who is a good person with good sentiments, with good projects for the benefit of the people then He is with that person, because in my personal opinion, I am not sure, I don't have very specific reason, concrete or material reason to say that, but I am sure that the people in jail in the Soviet Union, in Cuba and in other communist countries who are dissidents politically with them, they use a lot of methods against the health of these persons, and in spite of that they can survive, and to be with a clear mind after 20, 25, 29 years in jail and in this process, you can believe that God is taking care of the people that suffer and the people who are persecuted for a good ideal and a good reason. For that situation, they, the communist, they cannot understand this reality and many of them have been converted to Christianity, and I heard some story, I am not sure if this is true, but I heard some study that said that Lenin, the leader of the Soviet Union, in the end, he recognized that he was defeated politically, and he recognized that hate, as the method was work that he used was not the method; that the method was the love, the love of God. Of course, the other leaders that were around him, they kept this as a secret, but in some way, some people said, that this was the experience even in Lenin, the leader and the establishment of Marxism in the Soviet Union, and I am sure that this leader, I am sure that Fidel Castro, in the health problem, he has some moment when he thinks for himself "I was wrong, I was not doing the best." Maybe he doesn't say that and I am sure that even if he said that, the people who would hear it would not tell any other person, but I am sure that this is the reality. IN this world, my dear brother, God is not only our creator, God is who has to take care of us and all the persons, and in the end, always God has the victory, and then, all of us who have had the privilege to pass through these situations, through this persecution, through this dangerous situation, we feel more with a victorious faith and we know that if God is with us, who will be against us. Glory be to God! Amen!

We would like to share others of our experiences in these years from 1975 until 1980 or so. In the same time when I participated in the Christian Conference for Peace in the Socialist region or countries, I had also the opportunity to participate in a worldwide way in our Methodist brotherhood and maybe the fact that I was open to participate in this socialist world-wide organization, our Cuban government granted me the visa and the opportunity to participate in the world-wide Methodist communion. Maybe, if I rejected to participate in the Socialist organization, maybe, I don't know, I am not sure, but maybe they will not grant me the opportunity to participate in the Methodist gathering. I was a member of the Central Committee of the World Methodist Council and I was a member of the Evangelization Committee. Then I was the secretary of the Evangelization Committee of the World Methodist Council for Latin America and this was a very good experience for me, because I had in that way the opportunity to participate in different Methodist gatherings. For example, in 1976 there was a gathering, a meeting of the Evangelization Committee of the World Methodist Council in Chicago and then the General Secretary, one American pastor and leader, he spoke with some senator and other political leader friend of his, and he granted through them my US visa to come to this gathering. The gathering was in January of 1977 but I came to the States in December the

27<sup>th</sup> of December of 1976. I didn't forget this occasion. For that occasion I went to Jamaica and I got my visa at the American Consulate in Jamaica and I came to the United States. How this was possible? Well, this was possible because in November of 1976 Jimmy Carter was elected as the president of the United States and even before he took the task in 1977, even in December of 76 when he was the president elect everything was changed and the situation was more open, and for that reason, I was the first Cuban Christian or pastor or leader who came to the United States under the new policy after the Revolution. This was a great experience for me, because I used this occasion to visit my brother and sister and here and specially my colleagues and pastors members of the Cuban church that were here in the States, and I remember that I came from Havana to Kingston, Jamaica, to Miami and I had a gathering with the other Cuban pastors who left Cuba in the beginning of the Revolution and this was a pretty happy gathering for me because I saw them after 15 or very close to 20 years of separation. But in the gathering there were some who were suspicious about me. They thought that I was a communist and so. And they, in the gathering, they asked me a lot of things.

D: Now, was this gathering at a church or at the 1<sup>st</sup> Methodist church in Miami?

R: Yes, in one Methodist church in Miami, and then he asked me...

D: Did you feel like you were being interrogated?

R: Yes, more or less, but I never had any pressure, because I know who I am, I know what are my way, what are my thoughts, my faith and for that reason, I had not been angry...

D: Do you remember whether there were any representatives of the government around or official Americans of the sort that were watching you? Were you allowed to just write it down any way you liked?

R: Well, I accept the reality that the government in Cuba many times is present in church gatherings through members of the church, and I think that maybe even here in the United States when we had this kind of gatherings, there are not specifically one CIA member but maybe there are some pastors or Christian leaders who are very close to the CIA or to the American government and they will tell to somebody what happened in that gathering. But you know, every time, everywhere I feel as a free man, because I don't have anger against any person, I accept the reality and the right of every person to think as they like and I respect them in Cuba and out of Cuba, but I know who I am and nobody will change...

D: How many people were in the meeting?

R: About 15 or 20.

D: Did you know them all?

R: Yes, every one of them I knew.

D: Were some more questioning than others?

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

D: If they were in a church?

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

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

just be to disappear, but hopefully they would let you know before so you can get somebody else out there.

R: Ok, I understand them, I understand that they, by decision to leave the country, they have a lot of problem...

D: Because you don't just leave, you don't just make the appointment to leave and book and flight and you are gone, there's a lot of question about whether you can really actually leave or not and when, etc.

R: Yeah, of course, and then the main reason that they said is that they were not sure if the government will grant them the permission of leaving if they are not living in the same place where they lived before because in other way, the law in the government was that a person must be living in the place where they ask for permission to leave the country at least for 2 years, and they said: this will be my problem for me and my family. But the office of Religious Affairs said to us that they will not apply this law.

D: So how many of these ministers in the room with you did you know back in Cuba? In other words, when you went to Miami to the church and there were the other Methodist ministers there how many of them did you know from earlier times?

R: All of them, of course, because I was pastor for 15... I entered the seminary in 1954 and this was 20 years after. We knew all of them, of course. And they asked a lot of questions, but in some point of the gathering Rev. Raziel Vazquez who was politically very strong person against Fidel because he had some problem. Fidel would have liked to kill him, and so. He had the reason to have this position, but he spoke to the gathering and said: well, every one of us has different questions, different thoughts and so, but we must proof the visit of Bishop Armando now and for asking about our good friend that we have there and how is the work in the church and so. This changed the orientation of the gathering and it was very pleasing for me to be there and so.

D: Did they all defer to him? Did they all accept him and his statement? Because he was probably the most vigorous...

R: Exactly, he was the best person to say that. And then I will not say that all of them changed their thoughts about my person but they changed the orientation of the gathering and they asked me about other pastors who were very close to them, and how the church in *Mayari*, the church in *Santiago de Cuba* and so were doing, and we had a very good...

D: How much did they know? How much information did they have of what was going on in Cuba? Did they know anything about what was going on in the church already?

R: Yes, they knew everything, because even when we didn't have communication directly and we didn't have the flights that we have right now between Cuba and Miami, they received in the community many pastors and members of the church that were families or friends of them that came through Spain or other country, so they had very

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

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

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

D: Was this after you visited them or before?

R: Before and after.

D: So they were waiting for you.

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

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

R: No, no.

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

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

D: It never really changed?

R: No. On the contrary.

D: It got worse.

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

D: Was he a Methodist minister?

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

D: Did you know him in Cuba?

R: Of course, of course. He was one of my District Superintendents and he was the pastor who was appointed to the *Marianao* church when I was elected as Bishop and he knew perfectly me, my wife, my children and so, and then, he was able to invite me to preach in his congregation in Hialeah, and do you know what? He told me that he received some telephone call telling him that somebody will put a bomb in his church, because he invited me to preach. Of course I preached and they didn't do anything, but this was the situation, and even when I came after my retirement in Cuba in 1990, I came to the United States and they had a very bad propaganda and action against me. For example, some friend of mine was the director of the church world service office in Miami when I came as resident, he called me and said: Armando, I would like to have you as a Methodist pastor working here with the people who came from Cuba and other countries in the same way that I like to have one Presbyterian and other Baptist pastor, and so, but of course for that reason, UMCOR in the General Board of Global Ministry must pay my salary, and so, and I was very happy with that, because in that way I will be here, but having a pastoral appointment, because I don't like to make some competition with them, as Bishop, I was happy to have this work and I said: Oh, if you can grant me this job, I will very happy and I will do my best in there. But the chief of police of this office to have my salary paid by the Global Ministries general agency, he needed to have the approval of the Methodist District superintendent in Miami, and then two or three of four Cuban pastors, my brothers, went to the District Superintendent office and told him that they don't agree that he appointed or recommended me for this job. Then in the first year that I was in Miami, I didn't have any salary from the Methodist church. There was a Methodist lay woman from *Báguanos*, the first church we had after the seminary that she started an independent congregation and she was my only human salvation, because when she knew that I was there, she visited me and after one month she asked me, Obispo Armando, what are your plans? And I said, well, I don't know exactly because I

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

D: What did they think about that?

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

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

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

D: Saint Andrew?

R: The hurricane Andrew.

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

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

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

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

D: How long before the hurricane came, how long were you pastor there?

R: One year.

D: You were there one year.

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

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

D: How many years were you down at Perrine, one year, two years?

R: We were in Perrine 3 years. The church in spite of hurricane Andrew grew and the congregation was very happy, but in 1994 I was in Cuba visiting my family and then I received a fax from the District Superintendent, a good friend of mine, David Brewer, asking me to contact him by telephone, and we, my wife and I, this was in last part of May, in 1994, and we knew that he was liked to share with me that there was a big problem in the Lake Placid Hispanic Methodist church, some moral problem with the pastor and so, and they had in that time one Anglo little congregation and the Hispanic church, and then, because of this problem, they invited other pastor who can speak fluent English, but nobody accepted the appointment, because there was big problem there, and then, in the end, he recommended me for that appointment in that church and...

D: Now are you saying that you knew what it was going to be. How did you know what it was going to be?

R: Because we knew the situation...

D: And you were expecting it?

R: So when he wanted to speak with me so quickly, urgently, we thought he'd like to offer us this church, and I called back before the conference, and exactly, he offered me this appointment.

D: Ok, let's go back a little bit. Was your family with you in Miami in 1990? Did they come in 1991? Did they move to the United States as well when you retired or did they stay in Cuba?

R: Well, we had our first daughter, our second daughter, Elina, she came to the States with her husband and a little child of two years of age through Mariel exodus and they lived in Chicago. And then this was the only relative I had here. But my oldest daughter, Alida also as her mother, the family, her husband and his family liked to leave Cuba, and they went to Costa Rica as the other people left the country after the Mariel exodus, and then Dorcas, my third daughter with her husband and two little children, they came about

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

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

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

D: So they mainly divided along Hispanic versus Anglo lines?

R: In some way he... as he was in personal trouble, I suppose that because of that reason, he did very different bad things, and then he spoke with the Anglo congregation that was very, very supportive of him and he said "no, my problem is not a personal problem; my problem is with the Hispanic people," and so...

D: So the Anglo people took on support for him while the Hispanics did not... That is very interesting, generally.

R: Yes. The Hispanic leaders spoke with the Bishop about his problema and for that reason he was separated from the church with a sabbatical time. He didn't receive more Methodist appointment in Florida, and then, in the Hispanic congregation there was a Group also who supported him, but not as many as the American Anglo congregation.

D: Now, did they have two different services, one in English and one in Spanish?

R: Yes. At 9 o'clock they had the English service and then at 11 o'clock we had the Spanish service.

D: Is that what you would do as well when you came?

R: Yes, but you must think if after 18 years my English is so bad, you can think 4 years after my coming to the States, to need to preach at 9 o'clock in English and 11 o'clock in Spanish, you can think that this was very, very hard for me.

D: Well, did you speak better English now than you did back then?

R: Of course.

D: Because now it would not be a problem for you, would it?

R: Now, but in that time I was... I could communicate in English some ideas and so and so, but to preach in English, to give a message to a congregation that can help them spiritually? This was a crazy situation.

D: Now, we haven't talked about this but, when did you first begin? This may go back to your school days, but when did you first study English? When was your first studying? Did you study in school at all?

R: I studied English in the seminary. Before that I studied very little on my own, but...

D: But not really in an educational way?

R: But in the seminary we had English class and we took, but you know, we didn't practice the English...

D: Of course not....

R: But in my international gatherings, I practiced a little bit my English and this was the best. But when the doctor David Brewer offered me I told him, "You know that my English is very short. You know everything, but if you, the Cabinet and the Bishop ask me to go there, I will obey in the name of God. I am a Methodist minister and I go wherever the Bishop and the cabinet ask me to go."

D: So you are on vacation in Cuba from your church in Perrine and you get a call, and then you have to decide very quickly if you're going to go to Lake Placid. Now, what kind of Hispanics were in Lake Placid? They were not Cuban, correct?

R: There was some, maybe four or five Cuban families, and the main congregation was from Puerto Rico. But they were very good persons and so.

D: And the church had been going on for about 18 years?

R: About 10 years I suppose. This was a very new congregation.

D: Now, was the former pastor Cuban?

R: No, Puerto Rican.

D: Puerto Rican. OK.

R: Yes, and then I accepted the appointment and we came to Lake Placid in the hand of God. Of course in the first week, I can tell you that I didn't sleep on Saturday night. I was working on my sermon in my service in English and so and so. But in the end, I like to tell you that this was for my wife and myself my great experience as pastor. Why? Of course because we need to look more from God, and this is good, and also because the Anglo congregation was very open and very receptive for us. And then, there was many things from God in that occasion. For example, in my first week of work in Lake Placid I received the visit of a great Christian American lady, Carolyn Burger.

D: Say the name again, please, a visit from...

R: In the first week I had in the office, in the church office a visit from Carolyn Burger, a very nice Christian that was a member of the big Anglo church in Lake Placid. But she came to me and said: "Oh pastor, when I pass through the street in front of the church, I felt that God told me, go and be in this church. I asked God, Oh God, why are you asking me that? But I am here because I like to obey God.

D: So she was already a member of another church?

R: Of the big Anglo Methodist church in the place.

D: Ok. First Methodist Church.

R: The First Methodist Church congregation, very big one, one thousand members or so. Very wonderful church. But then she told me that and I said, well my dear sister, if God asked you that, I will be very happy to have you here. I'm sure that you will be a great help for me. And so this was. She was my great help. She wrote the bulletin in English every week.

D: Did she know you had just come? Did she know you had just arrived?

R: No, no.

D: Or did she have a feeling that she just had to come in?

R: Yes, yes. I met her when she came in for the first time.

D: She didn't know that you had just been appointed or anything like that.

R: No, no, no. She didn't know me and I didn't know her. She was obeying the will of God. And this was one of the great blessings for my work, because she wrote the bulletin in English every week and she and another wonderful leaders, an older person about sixty, each of them was the liturgist in the service, one week one, and the other week the other. And in that way, in many other aspects, God heard me, of course. Immediately I took myself to study English and there was another lady, she was very lovely lady, and she offered to me to come every Sunday at the office of the church one hour before the

service at eight in the morning every Sunday, and she helped me with my sermon with my English and so. And I can tell you that this was one of our biggest and wonderful experiences, to be pastors to an Anglo congregation without knowledge of English at all. They were very kind with me and every Sunday they greeted me and said: “oh pastor, you are progressing in your English,” and so, and they said, “well, you preached very little time, maybe 8 or 10 minutes, but your message helped me” and we had a great time, even, the Anglo congregation grew in my time. We had new family as members and so. In the way that Spanish congregation, specially the Puerto Rican Methodist, they were a little jealous because they knew that the Anglo people loved us in a very good way and so, but one time more, God helped me in some difficult and challenging situation and God gave me the victory in the faith, in the spiritual and in the work my brother. OK?