

**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 5th and I'm here once again to begin a new day with Pastor Rev. Armando Rodriguez and today we are going to speak about three subjects, maybe four, the first being the Mariel boat lift, the second being the *centenario* of the Methodist Church, the 100th anniversary of the Methodist church in Cuba, and the Mariel boatlift as well as Jesse Jackson. OK.

We will begin then with the crisis in 1980 with the Peruvian embassy and the Mariel boatlift.

R: This Peruvian embassy crisis was in the holy week of 1980. The problem was that a group of people went to the Peruvian embassy and Fidel was very unhappy with that, and then he put out the security police in this embassy, and some people said that about 20 or 30 bad persons were sent to make trouble in the Peruvian embassy.

D: Now, why was Peruvian embassy the place where people went? And then specifically for what reason were they going to that embassy?

R: Of course, to leave Cuba.

D: To leave Cuba they would go to Peru and maybe somewhere else after.

R: Of course, the United States.

D: Right. Why do you think they chose the Peruvian embassy? Was it just easier or they were easier people to deal with?

R: My only opinion is that in that moment the Peruvian government was not very sympathetic with the Revolution and Fidel Castro and maybe they thought that they will protect them and give them the opportunity to leave the country.

D: OK.

R: Then, a group of people went to the embassy and Fidel took out the security police and he sent 20 or 30 very bad people to have some trouble inside the embassy, but what happened? When the Cuban people found out that there was no security police in the embassy this day and the next night, hundreds and thousands and thousands of people came from wherever in Cuba. Many people in this night came from *Pinar del Rio*, or *Matanzas* or *Santa Clara* province and of course, a lot, a lot of the residents in Havana, they went to the Peruvian embassy. In my opinion this was a great surprise for Fidel and the Revolution, because maybe they thought that the Cuban people will not do that, but this was one extraordinary bad situation for the Revolution. In the second day I was back in my home from some churches in the Havana area and I wanted to go by my car to the place where the Peruvian embassy was and this was, we say *un hervidero de gente*, a great multitude of people walking around this place and trying to enter the embassy, and something that was so, so surprising for me, the car of the policemen, they were speaking through some speakers and said to the people, "oh people, go back to your homes; the embassy is full of people; you will not be safe in that place; please go back to your home and maybe tomorrow or in this day you will make some arrangement and you will be able to do anything that you like." This surprised me because I thought I was in the contrary, but in my opinion, the surprise that the government had, they didn't know how to manage the situation, and the only situation was to have no violence against the people, because this was the real Cuban people in thousands and thousands of persons, and then I went to my house, but this was a very difficult situation for 3 or 4 days. I don't remember exactly how many days it was, but in concrete, in the Peruvian embassy with maybe one acre of expansion, or one acre and a half, there was more than 10,000 Cubans inside, and you can imagine, they didn't have restroom, they didn't have food, they didn't have water, they had nothing, and they were there with the decision to be there and to see how they can go out of Cuba. After that, the government, of course, all the embassies from all the other countries around the world, they supported completely the Peruvian embassy, and then, after 2 or 3 or 4 days, I don't remember exactly how many days, the government arrived at some agreement with the Peruvian Embassy, and they said that the people who were there, they can have a list of names and so, and the people there can go back to their home and they will prepare the way for them to leave Cuba. In this occasion with this situation, then, the main solution that Fidel gave to this situation was to open Mariel. They said, "any Cuban relative living in the United State can come by boat to Mariel and they can take their relatives here in Cuba, and then this was the beginning of the Mariel crisis, when Carter was the president, he, in my opinion the reaction of President Carter was very dubious in two ways: in some moment in this first occasion he said, no we must obey the law and we will not receive the Cubans here in the States, but the next day he said the contrary and he did the contrary. He received them in Key West and then you know, more than 120,000 Cuban people came here in this situation through the Mariel boat problem.

In my opinion, Fidel was wrong because he thought that the Cuban people were not ready to leave and to take advantage of any opportunity that they have, but of course, his mind works very quickly, and in some way for his convenience. For example, every people in general know, that he had this opportunity to send here to the United States thousands and thousands of people in jail, bad people, they sent to the States even many people who

were crazy or so, with bad health in their mind and so, and then, when the Cuban relatives coming from the United States to Mariel port, they put in these boats, not only the little group of family relatives that the people went to Cuba to bring to the States, but also many other of the people that they'd like to come here. Of course, there was a great, big, big problem, because there was a big number of boats there, and the government in Cuba was very specific to take a good account of the people and so, and there was a lot of problem, difficulties and so, because the people that was in the boat waiting for the opportunity to pick up their relative and other person, they were some days and even more than a week waiting without food, without water, and then the Cuban government profited in this occasion selling them with the very special price, very high price, all the food and water that they needed. Of course, there are other bad stories. Many boats that were not big boats, they put many, many persons and some of them, how you say?

D: Drowned?

R: Drowned. We had very close experience because one of our daughters, Elina, she was married with a young person who was a political prisoner before, and this was any person who was in jail, they can ask to leave the country if they had some relative that liked to pick them up, and some brother in law of my daughter went to Cuba in a boat and that way they came here to the States. But what happened? They had a child of about 2-years old. It was very difficult, even when they prepared food and water for the kid, but they took the boat and then the weather was very, very bad. They could not come to Key West as they liked in that moment. But then, when a person took a boat, he could not go back to Cuba. He was out of Cuba and they don't permit, even for the weather problem, that they can be in Cuba more. And then, they were about one or two days in the port of Mariel, and they could not come because the weather was very bad. At least they can come and so and so, and it's very interesting the description that they made about this boat, because there was a lot of different persons. She, as Christian, she said that she was singing some Christian songs and so, and one time, maybe 15 or 20 years after that experience, she was in some place with somebody that also came to the States with the others in the same situation and she asked him, "what do you remember of your trip?" and he said "oh, the only thing I remember is that in our boat was a lady that was all the time singing Christian songs" and then she said, "Oh, I think that this was myself" and he asked to her "and what do you remember of your trip?" "Well, I remember—my daughter said—that there was a young person that was telling to the group "I will go to the United States to have a surgery on my nerves," and he said, "oh, this was me!" And then, there are a lot of comments about that.

D: So they obviously made it to Key West.

R: To Key West and then they called my sister in Miami and then she and her daughter, the daughter of my sister, they went to Key West from Miami, and they were looking for my daughter in every camp that they had, because there were thousands and tens of thousands Cubans coming in that day. We remember this situation as a very special emphasis, because, of course, in that time, in that way, we lost a lot of members of our different churches, and even a lot of pastors, not exactly maybe from Mariel boatlift, but

this was the occasion when many other Cubans, they decided to go out of Cuba. And there was in that time...

D: So they could go anywhere they wanted.

R: Of course, of course... In that time, some of our best leaders in the church came to the States, for example, Aldo Martin who was District Superintendent here in Lakeland, he came, not by Mariel boat, but in that situation to Spain or through Mexico or other place, and also Rev. Daniel Pelay, other of our great leaders, Juan Dominguez and many others. Of course, this made us more difficult situation, because we lost a lot of pastors and lay leaders and for that reason I needed to take one appointment. I needed to appoint myself to the church in *Vedado*, and then in that occasion one of my helpers was the actual Bishop of Cuba, Rev. Ricardo Pereira. But, thanks be to God, we solved all our situation. In that circumstance that we didn't have enough pastors, was our experience with Rev. Jose Garrido, the History professor in the seminary that was very sympathetic with the Revolution, and of course against my person, and so, and so, and my political opponent in the church. Even when I appointed him in different occasion as District Superintendent in the Matanzas District and as Executive Secretary of the Board of Evangelization in Cuba, I don't know what was in his mind. In one time I asked him, "oh Garrido, what is your goal? What would you like to do or what would you like to be? Because you have been District Superintendent, Executive Secretary of one of the more important agencies or boards, committees, but you are not satisfied in any way..." and this was one of different problems that we had in the development of our church. But thanks be to God, God gave me the patience, wisdom and the love to resist every one of these situations. I don't know if you have any question?

D: So how did this event affect your local congregation? Did many of them leave?

R: Many of them left and we didn't have enough pastors for our appointments, and of course we had some problems with our general budget...

D: Did it create a level of uncertainty in the congregations? In other ways, people started thinking about moving and things that changed and that occupied their minds and so forth?

R: Of course, I am sure that this was in the mind of many of other leaders and members, but thanks be to God, we had always our great challenge for the people: if you like to be here as a Christian person, working and supporting our church, you have a place in our church. And then we maintained our victorious challenge and spirit in that way. We said "if any one decides to go out of Cuba, we don't have anything against them, but we, the people who decide to remain in Cuba and to be faithful to God and the church, we are together and we will go.

Even in that uncertain situation, confusion and so, we maintained our challenge for the evangelization. We challenged any person who would like to accept Christ and become a member of the church, and also our pastoral situation was very difficult, because many of

our best leaders left the country, and we don't have other young persons to take their place, but, with the layman, the women, the young persons, we maintained every one of our churches with the doors open every Sunday, and then, in our gatherings, District or National gatherings, we made a challenge to our young people to make the decision to be a pastor. In that way, the situation was of confusion, the situation was uncertain for the future, but we maintained the spirit and the atmosphere of work and to faithfulness to God. And I think this gave us, the church in Cuba, in a very, very good situation, because in spite that any kind of problem, any kind of difficulties, we maintained our position, we maintained our strategy, our work and our challenge to everyone who liked to be faithful to God, we'd like to have with us working and maintaining the Methodist church in every aspect of the work. And thanks be to God, even when some of us had some different tasks, for example, in some time I was before being elected as Bishop, I was the pastor in the *Marianao* church, one of our biggest congregations in Cuba. I was District Superintendent, I was professor in the seminary of Matanzas, and I had a lot of different tasks, but we did it with pleasure and with love, and this had a good answer from all our people, because all of the, even when they don't have experience, they didn't have the necessary training, but everyone was ready to do anything that the church and the Bishop asked them to do.

D: OK. So the next thing today is to cover the... can you say that also explain what that is.

R: Of course; the second subject that we'd like to develop today is a very special and great celebration: our Centennial celebration of the Methodist work in Cuba. We were preparing the...

D: Centennial is a hundred year anniversary and this was in 1983, a hundredth anniversary from 1883.

R: Of course, but what happened that the teaching and the books writing about the history of the Methodist church in Cuba said that the Methodist Church in Cuba began in 1898, when the Spanish-American war finished. For example, one of our very wonderful missionaries who lived I think all his ministry in Cuba, S.A. Neblet, he worked in Cuba maybe fifty years, in the beginning of the 19th century until he was retired, and he, in 1948, fifty years after the coming of the American missionaries, he wrote in a special book "50 years of the Methodist Church in Cuba." But, 4 years before 1983, when we sought guidance from that book and other aspects of our history until that time, we would like to celebrate our 75th anniversary, but when we studied our church, our beginning, we understood that in 1883 the Florida Annual Conference appointed *Enrique B. Someillán* and *Aurelio Silvera*, two Cubans who came here during the first war against Spain, the 10-year war.

D: 1868 to 1878

R: Yeah. They came here because they were *pro-Cuba-Libre* (Free Cuba).

D: Can you spell these two names, the two individuals, can you spell those?

R: OK. Enrique; Henry.

D: Enrique, we know that.

R: B. Someillan. S-O-M-E-I-L-L-A-N and Aurelio Silveira, A-U-R-E-L-I-O S-I-L-V-E-R-A. He was, they were sent to Cuba to begin the Methodist Church and they did a great work in Havana. The owner of the Hotel Saratoga (Saratoga Hotel) (S-A-R-O... no)

D: Saratoga, like Saratoga, New York.

R: Of course, yeah.

D: Of course, sure.

R: The owner of this hotel gave to them a room to have a gathering and this was very wonderful. They had a lot of people willing to accept Christ as their savior and so, and this work that began in 1883 was maintained until 1898 when the Spanish-American war finished and there was different leaders in the church, etc. but they were alive and they maintained the congregation in spite that in that time, they were an illegal church, because the Spanish government didn't permit in Cuba any other church but only the Catholic church, but they worked in spite the difficulties and persecution and so and so, and then when Bishop Carter and the other American missionary went to Cuba in 1998 they found a group of Methodist there and of course the leaders and so, but brother S. A. Neblet, in his book "50 Years of Methodist Church in Cuba" he said in the introduction more or less that there was a group of Cuban Methodists in Havana when we came in 1898 but they were a very little group and they were not an important faction in the Methodist church, but for us, for the Cuban Methodists, we understood that this was a very special reality, a very special blessing. Why? Because we had the honor that the Methodist church in Cuba was founded as a result of the work of the Cuban preachers. They were local pastors here in Florida and they Florida Annual Conference sent them, but they were Cuban and they started the Methodist church in Cuba.

D: Now had anybody done any work in where they came from, were they from Key West or were they in Key West or were they in Tampa before, or, where were they before, do you know?

R: Yes, we know more or less, even when we don't have exactly the itinerary, but the main point was Key West. They were converted there, but for example, *Enrique B. Someillán*, he had a *beca* for study [scholarship] somebody paid their study...

D: He had a patron, a supporter?

R: A supporter, and he went to some school or college in Virginia or in other state and he studied, of course, they studied English and so, but they came back here and they worked

with the Spanish work in Key West and Tampa and different places, and for that reason they went to Cuba and they spent there maybe, I don't know exactly, but around 3 years, two, three, four years, and they came back to the States and have other appointments with the Cuban congregations here in Florida and then other leaders took the responsibility of the Cuban group.

Key West and Tampa, Ybor City, were very important places, not only for the revolution of *José Martí*, but also for the Cuban beginning, the beginning of the mission in Cuba. As I told you they were Cuban. Also, they were very close to *José Martí* and the other leaders of our liberation war, and for us in Cuba this has one tremendous meaning, because the beginning of our church was together with the struggle against Spain and we, the Methodists, we had this great honor and we don't like to finish, to put out, this great circumstance, and for that reason, we called to celebrate our centennial in 1983.

D: Now what were some of the things that you did to recognize that commemoration in your churches?

R: Oh, this was a very special project. Four years before 1983, in our little general conference, we made the plan for our big celebration and to say, we made the plan, this means so much than you can think or other person can think. Do you know what? Because in that time, we had only our food ration as every person. We cannot buy anything for any celebration, for any gathering. Then, we made our plan as I told you four years before, and one of our special plan was how we can have in 1983 30,000 food rations. We made big plans, and we thought that in a week of celebrations we would need 30,000 food rations. Four years before, we divided these 30,000 of food rations between the Districts according to the number of churches and membership in each district. We told to them: we need from you this amount of pounds of protein, we need this amount of pounds of rice, of beans and everything. And then, every district distributed between their churches the amount that every church must have. Of course, our biggest problem was the protein, but we said, we need this amount of pounds of pork, we need this amount of pounds of chicken, we need this amount of pounds of turkey, and lamb and so, and then they, in every local church, must grow the pork, the chicken, the turkey, the lamb and everything, in order to have this food for our big gathering. But what was other of our problems? The transportation. How will we transport this amount of food from every corner in Cuba to Havana for our meeting? Then we thought that we will rent to the government some freezer car, and then to go to Baracoa to Havana and Pinar del Rio to Havana, but we didn't have this opportunity. But what happened? The mind of the Bishop Ricardo Pereira was working always and he came to my office one or two years after when we had the pork and the protein but we don't have how to transport them. He came two years before and told me. Oh Bishop, in my district in Pinar del Rio there is one owner of a little farm and they grow pork. Do you think that we can ask him not to sell the pork that they grow in these two years, and then, if we don't have transportation, we can ask the local church in every part of Cuba to sell the pork (that was very easy to sell because this was only the protein that the Cuban people have, and then we will bring from Pinar del Rio to Havana, only two-hour trip, the pork. I agreed and this was our human salvation, for that reason, because the churches sold the pork and the chicken in

their places and then we bought this pork. Of course, the story doesn't end there. We planned to have the pork dead and prepared one day before our beginning in the two or three days after and then one or two days before the end we have in three times, our food from Pinar del Rio. And we prepared a group of pastors and laymen who went to this farm and they brought the pork and they prepared it and so. But what happened? The car, a very old car belonging to the church broke down on the way when they were bringing more than 2,000 pounds of pork and then, in that time, I had my first car. We called it *Samuelito*. Samuel—I will tell you in some moment why this car was called *Samuelito*—this was the only car of the Bishop, we said, take *Samuelito* my car, and go and bring the pork here. But what happened? They came to *Vedado* church where we had our special center for distribution in the middle of the night, and then this protein was one day without refrigeration. When they came to *Vedado*, they were not smelling very good. Then we said. We will bring and we will clean this pork and so. But what happened? In the middle of the night, in our church that as you saw is surrounded by many different buildings, the policemen asked us. Oh, we have the protest from some neighbor here because they said that they have some sick person and they need to sleep and to go to work. And what happened here? I explained to them and one of our better credentials was the permission that we asked to the government for the visa of the Methodist Bishop and leaders from other countries. And I explained, you know, we will have a lot of visitors from other countries and we need to feed them, and we need to do that. And they said, well, it's ok, we will not take you to jail, but be sure that you will not do more loud.

D: Night time activity.

R: Yes, night time activity and so, and this was one of the problems. But this was, my dear brother, a great, great celebration.

We had, I think, in that time, the visit of Bishop Roy Short, the visit of a person who was not elected Bishop yet, but he was one of our missionaries, Lloyd Knox and many other visitors, and they saw perfectly. We planned to have one week of celebrations. Then, on the day they celebrated the assembly of the Women Society in other church and the Men Assembly, the Youth Assembly and the Teen Agers Assembly. We put them in different churches in the *Vedado* church were the women, they had the best facilities that we had. In the Central Church in Havana downtown, the men. The youth people in the *Marianao* church. And then, the teenagers in the Episcopalian Cathedral, that they facilitated to us. Then, every one of them had their own organization. The breakfast, the lunch and the dinner with their meeting, and then at night, we had in the *Marianao* sanctuary that is the bigger sanctuary we have in Havana and in Cuba, we had our centennial celebration gathering, but, how can we transport all these people for that night activity? Well, in some way we had the help of other Methodist workers, and we rented some buses that were for the workers in the center of the work. We paid to the drivers and we had a group of busses for *Vedado*, downtown Havana and the Episcopalian Cathedral. We assigned one of our streets around the Mariano church and then every bus came to the street to bring the persons and then after the service to pick up the persons and back to their situation. Of course, everything was complicated, but the people in that situation, to have around one thousand pastors and delegates from all our churches celebrating our 100-

years of work, this was a very, very special celebration, my brother. This was a festival, this was *la fiesta metodista de los cien años*; the Methodist festival of the 100 years. And of course, when, as you saw in our service, when our people are together in the church praising God and sharing their faith and fraternal love one to another, we don't think in difficulties. We don't think that we don't have enough food. We don't think in any problem. We are only praising God and celebrating the love of God and so. And with dynamic thinking in the future and in the work of the Methodist Church for the good of the Cuban people. For that reason in that time that you must know that we had in all Cuba, only about maybe a little less than 2,000 members. But all these 2,000 members, they were FULL members. They were tightest, they supported the church and so, and what happened? That we, in the national and district gatherings, we had more better food than everyone ate in their home. Why? Because everyone contributed the food that they have in their region, and of course, there are a lot of jokes, not jokes but very different experiences, that they had. For example, Antonio Ruiz, one of our very active pastors in Oriente, he and his church made guava marmalade, two big *garrafón* about how much? Maybe 10 gallons each one of crystal bottle, big bottle.

D: Like guava jelly?

R: Guava jelly, yes, that's right. And he brought these two big bottles of guava jelly by train, but in one occasion when the train was moving a lot, one of these big gallons got down and was broke in the train. You can imagine what was the situation with the other passengers and so, and this was a very famous experience that we had, and as this, many, many others. But all of these experiences were for happiness, for praising God, for our enjoyment. And we had in all these gatherings, the best food that we can have in our homes and so. The celebration was very nice and gave to us a new impact for continuing the work. Of course, there some other very interesting anecdotes. In that time, the Bishop of Florida was Bishop Earl Gladstone Hunt and he was a good friend of mine from the gathering of the World Methodist Council, and he liked to invite me to the Florida Annual Conference in 1982, one year before our celebration, and he wrote to me a letter of invitation and so. But do you know what happened? My good colleague Cuban Methodist pastor here in Florida, they sent a delegation to Bishop Hunt's office and they told him, "if Bishop Armando Rodriguez comes to our next annual conference, we will make a lot of problem to you." Because they don't like our celebration, because they said, no, the beginning of the Methodist church in Cuba was 1898, not 1883, and of course, as I told you, they thought that I was a communist and that I was in connection with Fidel Castro and so, they said in that time that I was in a picture with Fidel and so, that was wrong because in that time Fidel didn't receive us and he was very far from us, but, we had the blessing of God.

D: So did you not go the meeting?

R: Of course, Bishop Hunt told me, I'm sorry, but maybe in the future, without telling me what happened, but I heard from other way what had been the cause. But, we had a very good cooperation from other part and in that time we had very good connection with the United Church in Canada, and then in 1982 I went to Toronto, and then the church there

gave to us \$5,000 Canadian dollars for our celebration. We didn't ask for any money, but they said by themselves, well sure, but you will have so many expenses and bills, so this was another great blessing that God gave the Methodist church in Cuba. How? Well, in that it was illegal to have US Dollars in Cuba. The dollar was authorized after the Soviet crisis in 1990, but this was in 1982 or 1983 and then the Canadian church didn't send the Canadian money through the bank transfer. They sent it to us in the church in Cuba a check for \$5,000 CAN and then, in Cuba, the church, the Cuban people cannot have dollars. But there was in the National Bank of Cuba one agency for international currency and the other churches—not the Methodist because we didn't receive any support from outside because we had self-support—but other churches, the Presbyterian church, the Episcopal church, etc., have an account in this agency of international currency. They cannot have the exchange. Then I thought, I have this \$5,000 CAN at hand. I will go to the international agency of the Cuban National Bank to open one account in the same way that the other churches have. We cannot have dollars, but at least we have an account there. This would make easier other transactions when we have a trip to outside Cuba, they would authorize us to pay and then we come back with the dollars and so, and so. I went there in prayer to have this account. But do you know what happened? When I was in the bank I told the truth, we didn't receive any currency from outside but I received this \$5,000 CAN and I'd like to open an account here in the international agency as the other churches have. I was thinking in the general situation, but what happened? God permitted that they open one account different. They called it "convertible Cuban pesos," this means "dollars," and then we didn't know that and we didn't present any letter from the office of religious affairs, from the *Registro de Asociaciones* [Registry of Associations], I was there only for myself with the treasurer to open an account. When I had the next trip outside, I went to the bank in the same way with a letter, asking this agency to permit me to pay in Cuban pesos my trip with the commitment that when I come back I would bring to them the dollars. But when I presented this letter, the employee told me, oh, but this account is for Cuban convertible dollars, you don't need this letter. And then I knew that we had an external currency account. Of course, immediately I spoke with the other churches and leaders and we made our account available to the other churches that were having problems. For example, the Cuban Council of Churches had some visitors from Angola and they came to Cuba with a check in dollars but they could not change it. Then I deposited the check of dollars in the account of the Methodist church and then I gave to them a check from our account and they solved very easily that situation.

Of course, this was in 1982, some years after that, maybe in 1985 or so, the situation for the currency was more open and the other churches were able also to have one convertible Cuban pesos account. This was another of our blessings of our celebration of our centennial festivities.

D: Now we'd like to go to the Jesse Jackson visit. Is that where we are? Is that the next item? I think so.

R: I think so.

D: Ok. Can you explain when you first learned about Jesse Jackson's visit and had you heard of him before? Did you know about him, who he was?

R: Ok. Yes, we knew in Cuba of course, the Cuban newspaper and radio and TV gave to him a very special promotion and they said that he had been invited by Fidel Castro to visit Cuba and so, and he was in a very special pre-presidential candidate for the democratic party, and so. Then...

D: This would have been in 1984.

R: 1984, yes. And then the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Cuba, that in general always has been with some left orientation, closer to the government than other churches, they liked to profit from this opportunity and they planned to have one workshop about the theological thinking of Martin Luther King, and I suppose they made some arrangements with the government through the office for religious affairs in the way that they invite Rev. Jesse Jackson to have the last sermon in that gathering, a workshop studying the theological thinking of Martin Luther King. He accepted and so, and in that occasion, Fidel Castro invited all the Evangelical leaders to some gathering with Jesse Jackson. For example, we were invited to participate in the *concierto en el Teatro Nacional*, the National Theater concert of Cuban music for him, and all the Cuban evangelical leaders were invited, and he invited us also to a big, big, big reception in the Central Committee of the party, one reception for Jesse Jackson. I'd like to say good that this was a biggest, biggest, biggest reception that was ever held in the English embassy?

R: ...in the English embassy even in Office of Interests of the United States in Cuba. This was the biggest reception. Why? Because we had there the biggest lobster that I have ever seen.

D: The biggest lobster you have ever seen?

R: Yeah. For all, maybe 300 or 400 people. Of course, the majority of them were from the government and ministry and so, and we had also one special ice cream that we had not seen for many, many years in Cuba, the *coco glace*—one ice cream that is put in the same coconut part where we have coconut, they cut in the middle and then they put coconut ice cream there, but this was one very special Cuban ice cream, but have not seen that in 30 years. And we had all the *coco glace* that we wanted, and so, and so, and so. And then, I have my own opinion of some other matter. For example, when we went with our special invitation to go the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Havana, we went through one door and there was there, between *comillas*... (when we make this [probably making gesture with hands])

D: Doorway? Entrance way?

R: No, no, when you'd like to express something...

D: Quotation marks?

R: Yes. We had Fidel Castro under quotation marks there. Why? Because there was a person with the same beard, the same characteristics, the same height as Fidel Castro, but for me this was not Fidel Castro Ruiz, this was a double of him, because the people in Cuba said that he has at least two doubles. And then,

D: Was he just standing there?

R: Of course.

D: Was he talking?

R: He didn't talk with anybody. Of course, I only, when I had my turn in the line shook hands with him and so, but there was other Evangelical leaders who are very, very close to the government, and they were before me, and I saw that this leader spoke to him in a very low voice and so, but he didn't answer anything, and so. Well, we had maybe half hour or so of greeting and every visitor to this special reception and so, and immediately, when this door was closed as soon as the guests finished coming in, we knew that Fidel had an special interview with all the newspapers coming from other countries, even the United States, and I thought, oh, how this man that was in the door for half an hour or more greeting the people and so, how can he immediately have this interview? For my opinion and many others, this was a double of him in this special task, and then, when the reception began he was very fresh in some room and had the interview with the newspaper from outside. But this was a great experience for us, because this was the only way that we can be in an official reception in Cuba with Fidel Castro and the other high level leaders of the Communist Party, and of course, we as Christians, we were there giving our testimony of humbleness. This was a great experience that we had in that occasion.

D: So how long did the reception last?

R: This was about two hours, two hours and a half.

D: Did you eat dinner there?

R: Of course, there was a lot of food.

D: How many people would have been in the room?

R: I suppose about three hundred or four hundred. It was a big room with very good organization; with tables where you have pork and other... everything that you can think, we had there. As I told you, this reception was biggest than any other reception that we had in any other important embassy in Havana. But I'd like to speak about other aspect. The last day of the visit of Jesse Jackson in Cuba, of course, in their negotiation with Fidel, he asked for some political prisoners, and of course, Fidel granted him the liberation of a pretty good group of political prisoners in that occasion. In my opinion this

was good for the position of Jesse Jackson because he visit Cuba, he was with Fidel, but he defended and he had the liberation of a group of dissidents, of political prisoners, and so. But the last day of his visit was the end of our workshop about the Martin Luther King theology and this gathering was in our *Vedado* Church with the facilities there, and the last service was in our sanctuary and all of us, the leaders of the Evangelical churches in Cuba, we were prepared to receive Rev. Jesse Jackson with all the diplomatic procedures, and then, before all this day, we knew that we had in this sanctuary and all this facility, the presence of two important groups: of course, the secret police from United States that they must take care of the security of Jesse Jackson, one pre-presidential candidate of course, and they were looking and walking to all our facilities, seeing everything, and also, we were sure that we had a good number of G-2, the secret police of the Cuban government, but we were without any preoccupation, we don't have anything to worry about, and so, and we prepared all the program and so, and when the time came that we were expecting Rev. Jesse Jackson in our meeting, all of us, we were in the front of the door of the *Vedado* Methodist church ready to greet him and to welcome him and so, there was a lot of people in front of the church on the street, and some minutes before the beginning of the service I saw that some people in civilian dressing that were in this group of people on the street, they began to walk very quickly with a hurry, with energy

D: In a hurry

R: And so, and we were wondering, what is happening here? And then immediately, we saw from the street that connects with the Havana University, was coming by foot, Fidel with Jesse Jackson and after them a group of people, and then we knew that the secret police received the notice that Fidel will be coming and they took their position and so, and so. They came and immediately, with hurry, they went to the building, because for security reason they don't like to be very much time outside of the building, and we didn't make our ceremonial welcome and so, and then they entered in our church. Of course, this was a gathering from the Ecumenical Council of churches, and there was a lot of people very close to the government, to the Revolution, and when they saw Fidel coming to the church, they clapped and so, and I suppose that this made Fidel very, very happy. Why? Because there was the newspaper-man from all around the world and they came to the church and the Christian people

D: clapping

R: clapping for him. And then, he went to the altar and the local pastor was very kind, and immediately he left his seat and Fidel occupied his seat, one or two from where I was sitting and we began our service, and in a very interesting situation, not myself, not the director of the workshop, nobody gave to him any welcome words. Because we were not nervous, but we didn't expect this reality, and we followed our program. Then, I think that the leader of the workshop spoke with him and he, Fidel, had some little words. He came to the pulpit and he said a very, very intelligent word. He said, well, I am not an specialist in prayer, I think that he meant in preaching, but he said in prayer. I am not an specialist in prayer, but I'd like to say to these people gathering here that I am, for me it's

a great honor to be here with the more important leader of the American politicians, the Reverend Jesse Jackson is one hope for the world, and so, and so. Very little, maybe two minutes, at least two minutes and then he sat down, and then after that,

D: Now what was he wearing? What kind of outfit was he wearing? His fatigues, his green fatigues? Was he wearing his green hat?

R: Yes,

D: Did he keep his hat on?

R: Yeah, and the green...

D: He wasn't wearing a suit of any kind. And he had his hat on too? Did he take his hat off?

R: I don't remember, but I remember that beside him was a very strong man with a very great character, that was very different to the expression of the face of all that were there even Fidel, he was very quiet hearing everything and so. And then,

D: Was this his body guard?

R: Of course, of course. And I remember two things in the time that he was there in the service, somebody brought to him a paper and he read it. I suppose that this paper contained the names of the political prisoners that he will put free in the honor of Jesse Jackson, and also, in the beginning when he was sitting down in his place, he asked to the body guard, where are the officials? He liked to know where the people who will take care of him.

D: Did he point out you? Did they point you out to him? Were you one of the officials?

R: No, no, he meant his official was the personal guards that they have in different positions, you know?

D: Oh I see.

R: The people who take care of him. Where are my officials? You know. And then Jesse Jackson had, I will say, one great sermon. The title of this sermon was "there is not possible to have any power in this world without the power of the love, the Christian love." I think that he was thinking in the love of the sentiment of love of Martin Luther King, and of course, he thought that maybe Fidel would not be with him in that occasion, but I was very happy, very happy that Fidel heard this sermon, because it was a very good sermon on this line. There is not possible to have any power in this world without the power of the love of God. And so, and we finished the service, and when we finished, Fidel came to me asked, there are here some Catholic representation? And I told him, "Yes, here is the Archbishop Jaime Ortega, and the Father *Carlos Manuel de Céspedes*, a

good representation” and he asked me “Please, bring me to them” and I suppose that he was a little worried because the first time that he visited a church it was not a Catholic church, and he, as a good, very good politician, he liked to make understand to the Catholic leaders why he was not the first time in the Catholic church.

D: Did you hear what he said?

R: No, no, of course, I was very

D: Reluctant to follow him?

R: Yeah, this was the best for me, as you can think, because he had body guards and whatever, and I don't like to have any... You know, in all my life, I said that, I don't like to make trouble to the people who are seeing me, or to the people who have an special political task. I like to develop my way, my life, my everything in a very easy situation. Without any complication, and then, I think that this was in a very special occasion for the relationship of the Revolution with the church. After that gathering, he, they went to the airport because Jesse Jackson was prepared to leave to Nicaragua or some Central American country, I don't know, and then when he was saying good bye to Jesse Jackson, there was many newspaper men and some of them asked—well *Comandante Fidel*, how did you feel in the church today? And he said, oh, I was very well, I was very happy, this was a very nice gathering. And after that, you must know that he sent a letter to the government agency that is in charge to sell new cars, he sent a letter telling the manager that they can sell car to the leaders of the church, and we had many other open doors after that visit. For that reason I said, I know that in the United States Jesse Jackson don't have a lot of sympathizers, I know that he has a lot of problems, but I can tell you, his visit in that occasion to Cuba made a great contribution to the relationship between the government, Fidel and the church, and we are very thankful to God for this visit. I never have been with Jesse Jackson, but in some moment, I will be with him and I will tell him this, because this is my honest interpretation of that situation. But we have other subject.

D: OK. Would you like to say anything more about that event or would you like to go to another subject, to the next subject?

R: My last comment is that the *Granma* newspaper in Cuba, had all the speeches of Jesse Jackson in Cuba, but not his sermon in the Methodist church.

D: Oh, he didn't put that in the newspaper.

R: The paper said that Fidel was with Jesse Jackson in the Methodist church and in the conclusion of the workshop about the Martin Luther King theology and so, but he didn't put the message, the wonderful message that Jesse Jackson had in that occasion.

D: Do you think that it was recorded? Do you think that anybody would have recorded it?

R: Of course, of course, I'm sure of that, I am sure of that.

D: But that wasn't something that he wanted the general public to hear, that sermon.

R: Yeah.

D: But I guess the very fact that he was there is, was something that was positive, and then he was quoted as saying that.

R: And then in my opinion, he and their high level leaders, saw that we, the Christian people in Cuba, we don't have any

D: Threats

R: against them and so. We are Cuban people as many others and so, and so, and so. Of course, there was in that occasion the Minister of Education in Cuba, and there was one important family history in that situation, because my younger son, Otoniel, he was very special in science, mathematics, chemistry and physics,

D: Your brother?

R: No, my younger son, Otoniel, Oto. You knew him in Cuba.

D: Oh, ok.

R: And then.

D: Oto

D: Oto. When he was ready, when finished—I will say *Secundaria Básica*—more or less the high school here, he participated in one scientific test and he gained the first place for all city of Havana, and in that year, the government put one *pre-university* college, specially for the young people who were the best in science, and then, they had thirty places for the thirty top people in the city of Havana province, and my son had the first place. But he was my son, and then when the minister of education received it—somebody told us—the list, he said, oh but this is not possible, Otoniel cannot go to this school. I am sure that there is some mistake in their test. Please look a new time for this test. And they come back to him and said, “Oh Minister, we looked at the test and really, this is the first expedient, there are no wrong situation in this, you can see it.” “No, no, no, this is not possible, please go another time and review, look another time at this because I am sure this is not possible.” And then, for the third time they came to the minister and said, “*Señor ministro*, Mr. Minister, we can tell you that the professionally, this is the best test that we have. Now, if politically there are some difficulties, this is your task, you can do everything, but in the scientific way, we are right giving to him the first place.” Do you know what? My son doesn't have a place in this special *pre-university* school for sciences. And so, this was one of the many difficulties we had,

our children had in Cuba and so, but for me it was very interesting that this Minister was with Fidel, the people in the church were clapping for him there, but we were discriminated in many ways. In my opinion, and thanks be to God, Otoniel understood the situation and then he liked to work as you know in the ministry of the church with communications and youth group music and so, and he is very happy with them. But he is a victim of the socialist reality in Cuba.

D: That's terrible, that's a shame.

R: Yes, this is terrible, but he managed and so. Well, after that we have a next a point. It is the Frei Betto books.

D: The book *Fidel and Religion* by Frei Betto, a Brazilian author and, can you explain the first time you learned about that book?

R: Yeah.

D: Did you know that man before the book came out?

R: I heard something about *Frei Betto*. Frei is very open to the revolution and very interested in the liberation theology, but never I had met him, but more or less on the same year, we had the impact of the visit of Rev. Jesse Jackson to Cuba and the first time that Fidel went to a church and so, and also the publication in Spanish, of course, for all the people in Cuba of this book, and as you have seen in this book Fidel expressed the real development when he was a child and he was in a Catholic school in Santiago de Cuba, and after that when he was in Havana in the Catholic school and so, and then, these two simultaneous realities, this made a great impact.

D: Positive impact?

R: Positive impact that the confrontation that we had before in general in the, not only in the Revolutionary people but also in the Cuban people in general, that they thought that Fidel and the Revolution was very, very strongly against the church, the Christians, and God. As Jesse Jackson, a protestant pastor visited Cuba and had this wonderful relationship with Fidel, the first visit of Fidel to the Methodist church as a the first church that he visited, and then the book that many, many Cubans read about Fidel and Religion from Jesse Jackson, this made a great contribution to the flexibility in the relationship between the Church and the Revolution, the Christians and so. There were many jokes in the Cuban people, and some of them said: "did you see that he was in the church? Then if he was in the church, why can we not go to the church also?" You know? And this made a great contribution, I will repeat, for this relationship between the Cubans and the church, and of course, in the future, our next subject will be the first great revival of the Methodist church in Cuba, where we had churches with thousands and thousands of people coming from all places for prayer for healing, and this was of course, this began in 1986 and 87, 88 and we will have this theme for the next...

D: 1987?

R: 1986, 1987, 1988, for our meeting.