

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

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

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celo evangelístico and then,

they were very good in their prayer, Bible reading and pastoral work. Their congregation grew more than the other congregation, and so, and we were happy with that situation, but in the end, more or less about the year

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

R: Yes.

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

R: Yes

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

R: Yes, of course. They had a special person, one wonderful lay pastor. His name is Ariel Gonzalez, and he was the leader of this group, and he was a person through whom God made a lot of miracles, and he was a wonderful pastor. But, in my opinion, the problem was that he thought by himself. *En español decimos: él se endiosó*. He believed that he was a God. And this made very bad situation. We called them to have discussion to speak about the problem, but the final action of them was to resign from the Methodist church. This was, as I told you, a very bad experience for us, that we had always a very united thinking and we heard every different opinions in social, political or theological matter, but in that occasion, we were in front of a group with very solid point of view, and they were not open to hear the other person. Then, in the beginning there were about 10 pastors involved in this situation. But thanks be to God, when we spoke with each one of them, only three of them, Ariel Gonzalez, the leader, Luis Perez, and another. Ariel Gonzalez was pastor in the church of *Omaja*, in *Oriente*, and Luis Perez was the pastor in *Gibara*, in *Oriente* also, and Walby Leyva was pastor in one of the (a)-5(stor in bsIETce)6(s4(sigT EMC P

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

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

economic life, and immediately he answered “No, my wish is to be a well prepared person, but to remain in my own rural community and to help other people in my area.”

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

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

D: But not just Methodist.

R: But just Methodist.

D: Oh, just Methodist?

R: Just Methodist.

D: It was just Methodist?

R: Yes, Methodist.

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

R: But in the Discipline of the United Methodist Church said that the General Board of Global Ministries is the channel for the relationship between the United church in the USA and the Methodist church, autonomous or not autonomous in the other countries around the world. That means that our connection, the channel for our relationship between the Methodist Church in Cuba and the Methodist Church in the USA all must be done through the General Board of Global Ministries. But they had – this is my personal opinion; maybe I am wrong—but my personal opinion is that they were not interested in the spiritual and evangelical work of the Methodist church. They had a special emphasis in social, political and economical issues, but we agreed that the church must do both work. But the main and the first task is the evangelistic and spiritual task and as a result of this Christian experience, we will do social work in the name of God as John Wesley did it. But they don't have the same opinion, and then in my personal understanding is, that they liked to have all their work social, political and economical contribution with some input for the left work. And the left work means

we suffered a lot in this reality because they liked to have in our Methodist Church in Cuba people who had the same opinion and the same point of view that they had, and in this way, I can say that we in Cuba, that had had one united church accepting the personal point of view of every one of our members, of our leaders, they put some factor of division in our people in Cuba. I mean that they had some special person in Cuba to whom they supported economically. They had communications between them and they