

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

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D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

I'm here once again with Armando Rodriguez at his house. And we're here to talk about the years from 1965 to 1968, and the first area we are going to address today is the difficulties of maintaining the church under very restrictive circumstances under the Castro regime from 1965 to 1968. Is that correct Armando?

R: Yes, that's right.

D: OK. That's our first subject for today.

R: Yeah, I have very great memories about that time. The government was in the position to destroy the church and the Christian faith in any... in all the ways of Cuba. For that purpose, they had a great battle by the newspaper and all the revolutionary propaganda, and they were telling the people through the radio and TV and the newspapers that the Christian faith was something of the past time, not for the new time. The new time in Cuba will be for scientific work, for education, for culture and so. But the church was a problem for this goal of the Revolution. For that reason, they used it as a way for interrupting the church work. They had different things, they did different things. For example, in the newspaper, in the radio and the TV they said that the church belonged to the past; the church belonged to the "burguesía"

D: Bourgeois?

R: Bourgeois, yeah.

D: Good Marxian term. Trying to teach people how to be good Marxists, right?

R: Yeah. And then...

D: It's the opiate of the masses.

R: Yeah

D: Correct? Now, how much of that was put out by the Cuban government? Did they quote Marx a lot? Did they use "religion", "opiate", did they use these kind of phrases "opiate of the masses"?

R: Of course

D: And that was also ingrained into the education system, the elementary school

R: Of course, the elementary school and all the levels of the education in Cuba, but also, as I told you, through the radio, the newspaper and TV; but more than that, through the slogans...

D: Propaganda

R: Propaganda, slogans and propaganda. They put big announcements of all this reality, and then, they put a great fear in many of the Cuban Christians. In the same time, they made a great propaganda war with families, with the workers and so. As I told you in, I think in other way, they... every Christian student in High School and college, they put one communist youth as a "padrino", godfather.

Their task was to gain their friendship but to say, to them that if they maintain their faith they will not be able to go to the University and so, and so, and then, of course, my older daughters and son, they were victims of this reality, but in the same way, especially in the University. They had big gatherings of the students and then in these occasions, they would call Christian students that maintained their faith, and they would call them before the people gathering and they said "you are against science; you belong to the past; and so, if you are a faithful Christian you don't belong in the university" and they expelled them from the universities. And of course this made a very dangerous situation for the Christian students and for the old people that they have this system where some friend would tell them that if they maintain their faith they will not be able to have some promotion or so. And then, with the children, they started a plan that they called "plan de la calle", "street plan", and then they put this "plan de la calle" or "street plan" on the street in front of the church. And in one hour before we begin our Sunday school for our children, they started the "plan de la calle" where they put the children to have some play, some fun, they distributed some "caramelos" [hard candy].

D: Coloring books?

R: Coloring books and many other things in the way of the children that planned to come to our Sunday school, so they must be in this situation and so. And some teachers in the primary school,

D: Now, would you say this was more common among men, or women, or was it, was there no pattern? Were women more, tended to be more Christian or were the men in the family more, or was there any pattern at all?

R: Yeah, of course there was, there was in both sides, but when the women was the member of the party and the man or the spouse was the Christian leader, men had more control, more personality. But when the man was the communist, he put more pressure on in his wife in these things. TJE Te

sugar mill without payment for 50 or 60 days. And then, the judge ended, and I spoke with the pastor and told him “oh José Ramón, I am so very sorry for you, because you will have to pay this price without any fault. But I exhort you to go every day to your work and work as hard as possible, as you will be able, and this will be your sermon, not for the congregation but for all the workers in the sugar mill who are saying “who are you?” and “who are the pastor and the Christians?” He was very angry and he asked, no Bishop, I’d like to appeal to other level that this was an unjust situation. “no, no, no” I told him “José Ramón. Be quiet and pay your price.” And he did it, and before the end, before he paid all the amount of time that he must work, the government asked him “no, it’s ok, you don’t need to come any more to complete the sentence” and so. And in that way there were different situations, different actions in the church that the revolutionary...

D: That’s fine.

R: Well, in that time, I think it was in November of 1965, the government started the UMAP: Unidad Militar Ayuda a la Producción. Military Unit to Help the Production, and in the project they put together pastors of the churches, priests of the Catholic church, leader of the Christian youth people, and also the “laca social”, the homosexual, and all the moral, immoral people, they put together under the military regime to work. All of this can give an idea of how hard was this time for us. Because there was a plan, with activities to clubber against the church and so. But thanks be to God, we had a group of faithful Christians, who maintained their faith, maintained their activity in the church, assisted the church every Sunday, and we had also young people as lay preachers so that in any week, we never had to close any church. All the pulpits in the Methodist church were open and with the message for the Christian people in the church. I remember that in one rural place in Oriente, a church in a town called La Criolla, near Holguín and Central Báguanos, some people rebelled against the revolution. There was some problem in

D: OK.

D: Liberation theology?

R: But not the liberation of theology we accepted in general. There are very good thoughts in the theology of liberation but we don't like to have any political compromise in Cuba.

D: Well maybe we can get into some of that later on. Maybe we can look into that a little bit later on when we get more down to the present.

R: Of course.

D: But for now we can understand the, that the Matanzas seminary continued on, even after, even into the 1960's

R: Yeah

D: And continued to produced new pastors?

R: Yeah

D: So that was always a resource that you could draw from then, in your Bishopry.

R: Of course, and we were very open to not having any confrontation, but to cooperate and to have our best that we can have in the seminary.

D: I got you off track from what you were going to talk about. Go back to what we were talking about before, before we got into the makeup of the seminary. Now, where were we?

R: We were in the work for the autonomy, and then this was wonderful in many ways. Why? Because when we were discussing our Principles of Faith, we, the new leadership in Cuba, we had the blessing of being together in our theological thinking, and then when we worked in different aspects of our Deud twa-13(20 of 56)96(6kfor46 the aMrthods tChhin Cuba, we

R: Yes.

D: So now we're looking forward into that. So how did that unfold? How did that process begin and what were the successes and failures of it?

R: Well, as

Autonomous Church, this did not mean that we will put the American Missionaries out of the church. There was a task for all. But we liked to have the Autonomous Church eh... in the... Cuban philosophy, in the Cuban reality. But they thought in the same way. I will ...

D: And then the other, what was the other, the other group? What did they say?

R: The other group, they think that with the help of God we will be able to do our best in our... for our...

D: So when did you begin thinking that?

R: Really, in all the time from the beginning when I was a young person I think in that way. This was my feeling. Of course, we have a gratefulness for all that we received from our mother church in the United States. We have a great appreciation for all our missionaries. We admired them because they left the United States, they left their families, they left their comfort here and they went to Cuba when we had a very bad health and education and transportation difficulties there. But we thought that we, the Cuban people, in the same way that other countries, we must have, we must pay the price to gain all Cuba for Christ. And we were ready to receive all the help that we can receive from others, and specially from the American church, but we liked to put the Methodist church in the will of the Cuban character and philosophy, and then I think, that this has been the great blessing and the growth of our church right now, is because we had in 1968 one Autonomous church, and thanks be to God, we can say for the glory of God, that we put the base of the church in a real Christian way. What do I mean? The church in Cuba is working and leading in the same level that we have the reality of the Cuban people. For example: The salary of the Bishop and the salary of the pastor are the same that the norm, the medium salary of the Cuban people, and for me, this is a great contribution, a great reality, because when the church leaders are thinking that they like to live in their own country with the level of the people in the United States, in the level of the Methodist pastors in the United States, this is wrong, this doesn't work, because we must be one with our people. And we, in our process, I

but we were together to be faithful to God and to preach the gospel for all of Cuba, not only one group of Cubans, but all that liked to hear the message of God. We had a respect for the atheist people, for the communist people. We didn't seek any, any controversy with them, but we were open in love for them, and ready to live in the same community as Christians, if they liked to live with us, but maintaining our great conviction, Christian conviction. Of course, in that situation, in that date from 1965 to 1968, we developed our work in the same reality of Cuba. For example, in that time, and even now, every Cuban had their ration cut. If we liked to have our Annual Conference, if we liked to have our youth assembly or women assembly or men assembly, we didn't have in that time any place where we could buy certain amount of rice and beans and meat and other food. No. We had all the meetings that were necessary and we ate every day the three meals. Why? Well, when we were planning our gathering, three or four months before, we sent a promotion to every church and then we asked to every Methodist person in Cuba, to give from their ration cut, some amount of rice and beans, and coffee and vegetables and everything. And then when the pastors and the lay delegates came to the gathering, they brought to our kitchen all these foods. And I'd like to tell you that this was other great experience that we had. In that time, the dollar was illegal in Cuba. In that time, we didn't have as now, shopping centers to buy in dollars. We could not buy any pound of food. But we had only the contribution of all the Cuban Methodist church. What does this mean? That all the Cuban Methodist people were involved in all our gatherings and in all our work. And they not only gave some amount of their food, but of course they also prayed for our meeting prayed for the future of the church. And I can tell you, that these gatherings, the Annual Conference, the Youth Assembly, the Women Assembly, the District Conferences, we called them, the great Methodist Festivals, because there was a happiness, a great joy to make and to share our experience and how God was working in our life, in our family, in our problem, in all our life. And this was, my friend, the best experience that we can have in that time.

D: Well, let me ask you a few questions about that.

R: Of course.

D: First, did you have this at one specific time in the year every year?

R: Yes.

D: Was there a month that usually was...?

R: We had the district conferences more or less in January and February.

D: OK.

R: Different situations. And then we had district conferences not one day, three or four hours as we have here. We had at least two or three days of conference. Then, the people lived together, they eat together and they praised the Lord together.

D: Was this in Havana all the time or other places?

R: No, the District Conferences were in some local church in each district. And of course there were different churches in each district that they liked to have the Annual Conference was every year in June. The second or the first week of June. Why? Because the school year ends in the beginning of June in Cuba. Then we liked to have our Annual Conference after the end of the education year in Cuba, because in that way, the Methodist church members who were teachers can come, and also we can move the pastors without any damage for their children, because they will go to other place to preach without any change and so. And then, the organization gathering or assembly, I mean the youth, women and men and teenager, we had in the summer time, maybe in July, August and September. Well, before September, because the first week of September, the education year began again. Then, in July and August we had the gathering for each organization in Cuba.

D: Now, did you ever have any trouble from the government during these events where there a lot of people assembled, and people coming from various places? Did you have trouble with the government? You can probably recall a lot of instances over the years...

R: Of course.

D: Because this would've gone way up into the 1970's I'm sure.

R: Of course. We needed to ask permission to the government to have this special gathering. We didn't need to have permission for every local activity, but for other regional gatherings or national gatherings we must.

In general they grant us this permission and so. There was some time of difficulty, but that was in the 70's, that they like to, to put more close...

D: Control?

R: Control on the church...

D: In the 1970's?

R: Yeah. And they, for example, they said that every gathering must have only certain number of people. And this was impossible for us. This was a great problem, because they don't like to have big gathering and so. But we struggled against that and so, and we succeeded in this situation. Yeah. Other question?

D: Ah... OK. I guess this is the end of our day, and we will begin here next time with the consecration

R: And the Autonomous conference

D: And the Autonomous conference next time we meet.