

CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA

DATE: May 15, 2008

D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: My name is Mike Denham and I am once again at the home of Armando Rodriguez and we are here today to resume our oral history. Today is May 15, 2008 and we are going to go back a little bit chronologically and cover some time that we have already been through but we are going to begin with Ar
the 1950s in Cuba. The first being Bishop Roy Short and the second being Bishop John Branscomb.

R: Thank you and welcome to my home and God bless your life and your work and everything.

D: Could you reflect a little bit about Roy Short and what kind of person he was and how you came to know him as well as your memories of him during his time as bishop starting in 1952?

R: I think that he was Bishop of Cuba from 1948 until 1956. Bishop Short and Bishop

two or twenty-four years old. Bishop Short made a great contribution to the Methodist Church in the 1950s. He helped build different churches in Cuba; one of them, San Pablo Methodist Church, in *Camagüey*, where Reverend Victor Rankin was the pastor and he also helped build the Methodist Church near the University. We called it the University Methodist Church in Havana. Now it is also the Central office of the Bishop in Cuba. Bishop Short was also organized with Dr. Harry Denman, the General Secretary of the General Board of Evangelists. Dr. Denman was a layman and he was not married. He said that he tithed on the reverse. He gave the church ninety percent of his salary and used for himself the ten percent. We had many chapels and different places that Dr. Denman built with his money.

D: What was his profession?

R:

time as the General Secretary of the General Board of Evangelists.

D: Was he an American?

R:

home where I was staying and they were concerned about me. I told them that everything had been o.k. Although, I can tell you, when the soldiers picked me up in that rural area in the mountains I was scared. But, after that first moment I prayed to God and God helped me and I felt the presence of God and the company of the Holy Spirit and I was no longer afraid in any way. On the contrary, I thought it was nice to have problems because I could testify about Jesus and preach the Gospel. It was in a spirit of victory regarding all this processes I have told you about. I stayed in the area and continued to visit places. On one occasion, there was another soldier with a machine gun and bullet vest that asked me who I was. I told him I was Pastor Armando Rodriguez. He told me that he knew who I was; that I was the pastor with the white card, because I gave the soldiers my card in the barracks with my name and my task as District Superintendent. He said that he knew that I was the person that was visiting that region and that he needed to tell me that I was not welcome in that region. I asked him why and he said that it was because all the Christian people were against the Revolution and that they were soldiers of the Revolution and that they were not afraid of any other army that came to Cuba to oppose them. He then said that against us they could do nothing because we would not fight against them and he let me go. Of course I was happy to continue to visit the people.

D: So just so I understand, this was about a three or four day period?

R: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In my opinion, the communist chief that was in charge of political matters in that region spoke to the army in that region about me and they were seeing what I was doing and where I was. On Sunday evening the Baptist congregation invited me to preach and, of course, I did it and the sanctuary was full. Many people were inside the windows and the doors and I was sure that there were also a large amount of people from the government, not in army uniform but dressed as civilians, to see and hear what I was preaching about. My sermon was very strong and I spoke to them about what our task as Christians was in different situations. I told them about when I was in seminary, the president of the seminary visited some country in Africa and spoke with the grandson of an African leader that was a cannibal, and the cannibal people ate some missionary and preacher in Africa, but the grandson was a converted Christian and the president of the seminary told us about this very interesting conversation about how the Christian message changed the situation in African. I put this in my sermon as an example of what the Christian missionaries and preachers do in different places in the world where there are difficult situations, even where people were cannibals. I finished the sermon without any problem. On Monday I went back to *Holguín* and this was a very interesting experience for me. I was in a difficult situation but God helped me and God was with me at every moment and I felt I gave a good testimony to what we as Christians were, not only to the people and Christians in general, but also before the leader of the atheistic revolution.

D: What year was this again?

R: This was in the beginning of 1961.

D: Was this before or after the Bay of Pigs?

R: This was before the Bay of Pigs.

D: What was your next experience?

R:

that was struggling. The soldiers that brought him were being very strong with him and they did the same with him as they did with me. In the end, they put both of us in a very little room with only one official table and closed the door. Immediately I thought that the army had put a microphone in the room to hear what we talked about in that room. I stayed very quiet and thought about what I might say. After about fifteen minutes the other person asked me why I was there and asked me what my problem was. I told him that I did not have any problem and that I was a pastor that was here to baptize children and that the soldiers brought me here but that I did not have a problem. He said to me that he had a big problem and that he was participating in an activity against the Revolution. March 13th the anniversary of the death of José Antonio Eserodrilla, the leader of the student directory in Havana that attacked the Batista palace. Fidel was speaking to the Cuban people that day. The young man said that he was speaking against

told him that I did not want to speak

about his problem because I wanted to be quiet and not speak of any problem thinking that there was a microphone there. After a few minutes he asked me if I knew Raul Ecolona and Candido Paris. I told him I knew them. He asked me what I thought about homosexuals as a Christian. This upset me because I thought that maybe this person was a homosexual and they put him with me in a room to say something against my morals. I told him that the Bible said homosexuals and immoral people cannot go to the Kingdom of God but when Jesus Christ died on the cross he paid for all of our sins, even the homosexual and that Jesus can save his life if he accepts Jesus Christ as his savior. After that I told him it was getting late and that we would be there all night and I wanted to sleep. I asked him to take the side of the room he liked and that I would take the other side and he did not answer me so I told him where I wanted to sleep. I sat down on the floor and put my head on the desk. He was not quiet and he began to hit the door and then a

Aires through Miami because there was more communication between Miami and all of Latin America and also because I like to see other friends and Cuban Methodists. We went from Havana to Miami and then *Buenos Aires* and returned from *Buenos Aires* to Miami. But when I was ready to go back to Cuba the Revolutionary government passed a new law. Any Cuban citizen who left the country needed special permission to return to Cuba. This was passed while I was out of the country. Of course, there were many other pastors and evangelical leaders in the same situation. The leader of the Ecumenical Council of Evangelical Churches in Cuba sent a list of all the pastors and leaders of the different churches who were out of Cuba that wished to return. After two or three days we received the answer that all of the pastors could return to Cuba except me. This was one of the saddest times in all of my seventy-eight years because I was in Miami all my other friends and pastors were asking me to use this occasion to bring my wife and children to come here and leave but I did not think so. I not only had my wife and family, but I also had about twenty five or thirty young lay preachers in charge of different churches and I did not want to leave Cuba. This was one of the only occasions I ever took some medicine for my nerves. I was stuck in Miami for one and a half months. I called the leader of the Council and asked what happened. They said I could stay in Miami but if I wanted to come back they would make another application. I asked to please make another application for permission. At that time Eularia Cook was in Costa Rica working with the illiteracy program and they invited me to go there. I went there and spent a wonderful week with them speaking about how we distributed the literature they left in Cuba in the rural area and I learned all their plans. I returned to Miami with the desire to return to Cuba. Many things took place during that time. For example, Dr. Carlos Perez, the official from the Board of Missions in Cuba visited my wife and asked her to prepare the children and the household to leave Cuba and go to Miami. She told him that I wanted to return to Cuba and continue my work.

D: How easy was it to communicate between Miami and your wife at that time?

R: At that time it was very easy because I could call her on the phone three or four times a week. The mail was also very good. We could mail and receive a letter within one week. Then Dr. Carlos Perez met with the twenty five or thirty young preachers and told them that I was in Miami and that I was not coming back and that they all must make their circuit and return home. But all the young preachers told him that I told them that I was working to come back and that they would wait for me there. He was not thinking about the necessity of the Methodist Church in Cuba but how to manage the business and go other places outside of Cuba. But my vision, and the vision I put in the lives of these young people was different. We wanted to stay in Cuba and pay the price of our testimony and remain in Cuba until the last moment possible. We did not want to be martyrs but we had faith that God would pick us up in the last moment. After four, five, or six weeks of calling the leader I begged them to make another application.

D: Let me ask you one more thing before we move on. So this event was after the Bay of Pigs and before the Cuban Missile Crisis?

R: Yes, that is correct. I liked to speak about another situation inside the life of the church in Cuba at this time from 1960 to 1962. We had a struggle for power in the Methodist Church. There were two different leaders. One of them was Dr. Angel Fu

automobile accident. But we said that if God was with us, even with this great loss, we will go ahead in our church.

D: Two questions. By 1963, how much money was still coming in from the United States?

R: We received without any difficulty month by month sixty percent of our budget until June of 1963.

D: So after that you would not receive any more money voluntarily?

R:

