

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

**INTERVIEW WITH:** ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

**INTERVIEWER:** DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

**PLACE:** LAKELAND, FLORIDA

**DATE:** June 11, 2008

**D=** DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

**R=** ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: Today is June 11<sup>th</sup> and once again we are in what we think is our last session, of oral history with Armando Rodríguez and today we're going to talk about his role in the Methodist church in Florida from when he retired in 1990 up to, well pretty much all the way to the present. So Armando, can you go through your places that you were posted here in Florida after coming here in 1990?

R: Yes, I as told you before, when I was retired as Bishop of the Methodist church in Cuba, I decided not to remain in Cuba because I don't like to be one interference or difficulty or problem for the new leadership that the church had, and then I was retired February 11, 1990 and I came to the Unites States the 1<sup>st</sup> day of April 1990. And then what happened? In that day the Florida conference had already done all the appointments for the new conference year in June. It was not possible to receive any appointment in that year 1990, but thanks be to God, I was in Miami living in my sister Lydia's house and then one wonderful lay woman who was a member in the first church I was appointed after my seminary study in *Báguanos, Oriente*, this lady, a great Christian, a great lay leader, Lydia Rodríguez, she had one independent congregation in Miami and she visited me and asked what will you do, Bishop, now that you are here in Florida. I explained to her that the Methodist church already had made all the appointments for the new conference year and I was unable to have any job. Then she invited me to help her in the independent congregation in Miami, and she was great because they gave me some housing allowance, they paid my rent and they gave me a pretty good salary for that time, they gave me \$250 every week and they gave to me everything for my apartment and so, and I worked with her all this year from 1990 until May 1991. I visited Bishop Hughes in Lakeland in that occasion and I asked him for some appointment for some work and he was very kind with me and in the next annual conference, in May 1991, he appointed me to Peace Hispanic congregation in south Miami, very near to Perrine. This was a great blessing for me because even when I had the salary and housing allowance with this great Christian leader, but she was in an independent congregation and I felt as a Methodist pastor and I was very happy to work inside the United Methodist organization here in Florida. Then I was appointed in May 1991 to Peace Hispanic United Methodist Church south Miami, and this was a good experience for me, even when one year later, in August of 1992, we had in the region where my congregation was, the main damage from the

Hurricane Andrew but this brought me an opportunity to serve the people, not only the congregation but all the community and we had a pretty good experience even in that bad time. Then in my three years in this congregation the church grew a lot in membership, in Sunday attendance and also in the budget, in the financial aspect. We worked in a big way. I challenged them in many ways and they answered my challenge and this was a great experience. But, as I told you I think some time before, in May 1994 I was on vacation in Cuba and then I received an email from Dr. David Brewer who was my dear District Superintendent in Miami asking me to call him, to communicate with him urgently. Then I called him and he said, well I have a new appointment for you. We, the Bishop and the Cabinet would like to have you in Lake Placid, Florida as pastors. This was not a very good appointment, I suppose that they offered this appointment to different persons before they asked me to go there. Why? Because in that congregation there were two services, one service in English and one service in Spanish, and of course, two years after my coming from Cuba my English was even worse than my bad English today, sixteen years later. But I suppose that they offered this appointment to other Cuban pastors working in Florida who speak pretty good English and I'm sure that even they called other Hispanic pastors in New York and New Jersey and other places offering this appointment, but what happened? There was a big problem in that church. The former pastor, a Puerto Rican pastor has some moral problem and the Bishop put him in sabbatical leave and then the congregation was in a very difficult situation with division, a group of the Anglo congregation supported the former pastor, other group was against him and the Hispanic congregation was the same, a group of them supported the former pastor and they didn't like that he left the congregation, but others, the majority, was willing to have another pastor. I accepted and I was there with a lot of human fear because this was so hard for me, to preach at 9am every Sunday in English and to preach in Spanish every Sunday at 11 am. But I accepted in the name of God and I prayed more than normal and I worked very hard and I am very thankful with my wife for the time from 1994 to 1997, three years that we were in this appointment. Why? Because the Anglo congregation that was, maybe the fifty percent that was with the other pastor, but they were very kind with me and they helped me in different occasion. They challenged me in many, many different situations. In that order I can say that one of my biggest experiences in my ministry was that time with the Anglo congregation. Of course we had a pretty good work with the Hispanics and so, but this was a very nice experience because I was not fluent in English, everything was very hard for me, but God helped me and they, the Anglo congregation was very kind and very grateful to me because they saw my effort and my love for them and so. But, in that time we, my wife and I, we felt the calling of God to go as missionaries in Honduras in Central America. We cannot say why, but in some way God told me in some way, I need you in Honduras. Before that I didn't know anything about Honduras. I never had been there, but God calling me to go to Honduras but He prepared the way because some time before in this year, the Board of Global Ministries was in agreement to start the Hispanic Methodist work in Honduras, and in that way we made all the arrangements and then in July 1997, Alida and I went to Honduras with any think in Honduras.

D: Without anything in Honduras.

R: Without anything in Honduras.

D: Now, who down there was working with you? Was it Icel's father? Icel Rodriguez' father? Was he there?

R: No. In the beginning Alida and I were the only ones, because they liked to test the proof what opportunity there was for the Methodist work in the country.

D: So it was up to you to go down there and assess the situation and let them know what you needed.

R: Exactly, what was the possibility, what we needed and so.

D: So how long did that take?

R: This took one year.

D: One whole year!

R: One whole year. We went to *Tegucigalpa*, the capital of Honduras, and we told the leader in Global Ministries that the first three months I like to not have any responsibility but only to visit different churches in Honduras, visit different cities, different regions and then after that, we started the Methodist church there. God guided us a lot in every step of our ministry. For one month or more we didn't have a house to live. We were in a ministerial house of some native evangelical church in Tegucigalpa living in one room and so, and I was very anxious for that situation, because at that time in Tegucigalpa you had two levels, there were many houses to rent in the very high level, for diplomats, for executives of big companies and so, and then the other was in a very low level, the poor people, and when we say poor people in Honduras, they are really poor people. In some way the general situation in Honduras is very similar to Nicaragua and then some person said that after Haiti, the second poorest country are Honduras and Nicaragua. And this was...

D: What about Guatemala. Wouldn't you say Guatemala too?

R: Maybe Guatemala and El Salvador, but in some way the people in general think that Guatemala and El Salvador in general have a better situation than Honduras and San Salvador. Of course, as you know, El Salvador is a little country but for that reason, some people say that the Salvadoran people are more hard worker and in that way they can live in a little higher level than in Honduras. In Honduras they have a lot of land, they have many things, but the people have not learned how to manage and how to work their own land and their own possibility. For that reason I suppose that Honduras with Nicaragua more or less and Haiti in our continent.

And then, we make connection with *Alfalit*, the literacy program that is founded by the United Methodist Church with a Cuban leader. *Alfalit* was started in Cuba before the

Revolution and they worked very hard with a literacy program in Cuba, but after the Revolution they moved, the leader moved to Costa Rica and they put the continental center or office in Costa Rica and they began to work in all the different countries in Latin America. Then the lady who is the director of *Alfalit* in Honduras, she was very kind with us and we put together our efforts and in that way, *Alfalit* and their work was a way for our evangelistic work. Why? Because we helped them with some resources in the different regions for their literacy program, but in that way I had the opportunity to contact people working in that organization and all of them maybe were Christian people in different regions. Then, they were the instrument to start the Methodist congregation in Honduras. Why? Because we helped the *Alfalit* literacy program, but I spoke with people in different regions, in rural areas, in towns, in big cities and we told them our interest to cooperate in the evangelization of Honduras. Then in different places where we would like to start the Methodist church, we invited these same leaders who were working with *Alfalit* and we told them that we'd like to have their support and their help to start the Methodist Church in this town, in this rural area, or in this city. We gave training what is the United Methodist church, what is our faith and our Biblical and theological interpretation and so, and then in different places, I spoke with their pastor, other denominations' pastors, and I told them, "we only like the cooperation of this Christian, this member, this leader for the beginning. I assure you that we will not take this member with us. We will ask them to be the same leader, the same leader in your church that they were before, but as a second mile, they will help me to start the Methodist church with people that don't belong to any church, people who are not protestant or evangelical. This made a very good opportunity for us, because we had the cooperation, the support of Christian leaders in every town or rural area or city and we, in that way, we had contact with the person, and we met of course in the same level of place as they have in their own community.

D: Now were there other protestant churches already there operating as well?

R: Of course.

D: Did they resent you coming in? Did they not like you coming in? How did they feel? Did they feel as though you were going to take their people, their congregants away?

R: No, I was very honest with them. We asked, "please help us in this first time, this first step. And we had very, very good relationship and connections and so. Of course, in my first three months I spoke with many of the national leaders of other protestant and evangelical churches in Honduras, and we had in one time, in one of the biggest hotels in Tegucigalpa a lunch inviting the ecumenical and the national leaders of different churches, and we told them who we are and what was our purpose to begin the Methodist church in Honduras and we answered all their questions. This was good. This opened the way in every situation.

D: So they didn't feel threatened at all?

R: And then for me it was a very interesting that they in the end, they told us two important matters. In the first place they said, “we congratulate you because you have come to Honduras the good way,” speaking with them and so, and then other more important point, many of the leaders told us, “well we know a little bit about the Methodist church and we know that the Methodist church is one historical denomination and in Honduras there are a lot of independent churches without a pretty good organizations without many different situations,” and they welcomed us because we were in an organized church and our contribution through the open channels with them will be very good.

D: Now did you have any relationship with the government? Did you have to ask permission from the government to be there? Was the government...

R: Of course, we made all the legal paper work to have the recognition of the Methodist church there. We had a very good relationship with local leaders, with the Mayor in different places, especially after the Hurricane Mitch. We built in Honduras more than one hundred fifty houses for the people who lost everything in the Hurricane and it was very interesting because the Samaritan purse, *la bolsa samaritana* that Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham directs, they made a great contribution in that occasion. But what happened? They built little houses. They built only one-room houses and then when I presented my plan and my budget to the General Board of Global Ministries and other levels in the church, they told me, “oh, you are asking for each house more money than the other churches are asking,” and I answered them, “yes, but why? Because we’d like to build houses, we say in Spanish *casas dignas para gentes dignas*, good house for good person, and then our houses had two...

D: Bedrooms?

R: Bedrooms. One...

D: Kitchen?

R: One kitchen. One bathroom, the living room and the dining room and more than that, outside the house one place where the ladies can wash and clean clothes. And they had some special place to save water because the water is a big problem everywhere in Honduras, and then we had a very, very nice experience in that situation, because we build houses with all the necessities that the people had and then in some place, the mayor told me that he showed the different houses that the different organizations were making, even the Catholic church, and all the visitors, when they saw the houses from different organizations, all of them asked them why every organization are not building houses as these, the Methodist houses? And the Mayor and all of them were very, very happy with our project. And of course we had after the hurricane Mitch a wonderful medical brigade, with two Honduran doctors, one dentist, and giving medicines and so in different places, and of course this was a wonderful opportunity to testify who we, the Methodists were. I am very happy that we in two years, we built more than one hundred fifty houses, we met tens of thousands of medical patients in different areas, and we went

to the rural areas where other medical brigades didn't go because they had medical group from Spain, even from Japan and so, but of course, they went to the places where the communications were better. But we went to the persons who were farther way. In summary, my dear brother, these two years of work were very, very good for us and we in summary...

D: Now the people who built the houses and the medical brigades, who were they? Were they Americans who came to volunteer their time? Or were they both?

R: Well we had both. For example, in the medical brigade we had one young person from Tennessee who did a great job, John Lemon, and he made good contribution because he saw our work and through his influence and family and so we received a lot of support there. I appointed him also as the responsible for volunteers in mission from different churches in the State and in one year and a half we had about twenty different groups that went to different places and they gave a wonderful offering, money for materials, and they worked for ten or twelve days with the national people there, but also we had a very good organization for that occasion. We made the plan, the dimensions of the church and so, and we paid for *albañil*, the people who put the cement, how you call those?

D: Bricklayers?

R: Bricklayers, and the person who directed the work. But we asked that the people who will receive the house, they with the family must work in this project. And this was a great experience because they were under the direction of the person who directed the project. They learned a lot about how to build their house. And they knew that these were houses for them they made the best contribution and the mayor in every city, the government in all the levels, they were very happy with our project and they had some trouble with the Catholic church, why? Because our work was to do the work with the contribution of the people who will live in the house, but they contributed only with their work, they didn't need to pay any penny for that situation, because we, through different ways in the church and the voluntary group, we had the money to buy the materials and then we told them that they will not need to pay any penny for that project. And what happened? In one of the cities the Catholic priest asked me to come and speak with him and do you know what he told me? That we, the Methodists, cannot do that, to give the houses to the people without any money, without any pay, why? Because they were doing the same but they must sign a contract that they must pay a lot of money for their houses and you can be sure that the Catholic church has ten, twenty or fifty times more money than us, because they had the support of the Catholic church here in the States, the Catholic church in Europe and many other things, and they told me, "you cannot do that." And I asked, "Why? Do you know that the Bible says that you receive by grace and you must give by grace?" "No, no, no; here you cannot do that. We will talk with the mayor and the government and we will ask them to give you a list of the more poor people and the disability people and so and so." But of course, we didn't follow their step and then they had the biggest problems in different cities, because then the people to whom they planned to give the houses, they asked them, why the Methodist church is giving to the persons without any payments and you are asking me some big payment for the house?

And then the mayor in one town told me that he must intervene in that conflict and then in the end, the Catholic church must do the same, to give their houses to the people without any payments. But this was a great experience for us. Why? Because we did many, many great things. For example, when we were in a program when the first group of houses, about thirty that we built before, the mayor was in that meeting and some business person in the city from whom we bought the material of course, and they gave us very special price for the material, and in that moment, we selected to whom we will give every house, because they worked in all the project, but every one of them don't know which one will be their house. One day before this last gathering I asked in a meeting with these thirty families who will be the owners of each house, I asked them to put in a piece of paper the name of all the groups of families that they thought they did the best contribution, the best work for all the project.

With the list of the people who made the best contribution to the building project we picked what they thought were the first and the last that contributed to this project, and then we had a balance that allowed us to give to the first ten families gift certificates of \$500. The second ten families we gave to them gift certificates for \$300 and the last ten families they received \$200 in gift certificates, and they with these gift certificates they could buy furniture and other things that they liked. Everyone could decide what they would buy with their gift certificate. There was a good experience in that gathering, because there were present the women who was the owner of one of our commerce enterprises in the city who sold us materials at a good price, and he sent me a note when the program was going on that she was ready to give the same price for any furniture that they decided to buy, the same price that she paid for this material without any benefits for her. That way, all the people were very happy. You should see their faces that they worked very hard, but they would have a good house for them, the good people of Honduras. It was a great blessing experience that we had in these two years as missionaries. Of course I learned a lot about the realities to be a missionary in another country, because even when we were, my wife and I were Hispanic, but of course, we were in a country with a very low economical level and they saw us more or less as the same way that the American missionary, but of course, we communicated perfectly with them, and many times they asked us, where did you learn Spanish? Because they thought that we were Americans. But this was a great experience and the church in Honduras is growing and I am very happy that we were the instrument of God to start this church.

D: Ok. So when you get back to the US, where did you go after that?

R: In that time I was sixty-nine years old, but of course as I came to the States with sixty years, we needed to work and to contribute to social security at least for ten years or forty quarters. In that situation we needed to wait until 2000 to have this requirement in the social security. Why? Because when we were sixty-five years old, we were American citizens and for our age we can ask to the government for the supplementary aid or the welfare in social security, but my wife and I agreed that if we were in good health condition and we could work, we'd like to complete the minimum to have the social security that we could have by our contribution. Of course before coming back to Florida we asked to the Bishop and to the cabinet here in Florida to give us a new appointment

and they appointed us to the Hispanic congregation in St. Petersburg, and then we went there in 1999 until 2001 and then we retired officially retired in that occasion. The conference was very kind and gave to us one house in Bartow where we could live and then we were retired and living there in the wonderful project that the Florida Annual conference has. They have about twenty houses that they designated for retired pastors with low income and they were very kind with us and they granted us the house there and then we retired, but in some months later there was some need for a pastor in a little Spanish congregation in Sebring and we offered to go there. The first time we made the trip two or three times a week from Bartow to Sebring, but one year after that they rented for us an apartment in Sebring and we were living there until 2003 when they had a young Spanish pastor for their work and we came to our new house in the same project here in Lakeland where we are working right now. Then in 2005 I was willing to work and the Bishop and the cabinet appointed me in the little congregation in Florida City south of Miami. I worked there for one year. The health of my wife and other situations asked me to come back here and I worked there in Florida City only one year. This was a pretty good experience also because that year the hurricane Katrina was in that region and we established in the Everglades a wonderful center for distribution of food and dresses shoes and many other things that different churches gave us to distribute there. We received a letter from the Red Cross because they were there distributing hot food someday for the people in the region and some newspaper man from the *Miami Herald* went to the region and then they published a picture of myself and they explained what work we were having there and also, the children and family organization, they liked to go there and they went to our humble center where we were working in that region and they gave a lot of food stamps to all the family in that region. There were many sick persons in the first time that they didn't have money for the medicine and so, and we helped in many different ways in that situation.

Then, this was our great experience, to serve the people in their need wherever we were. I praise God for that occasion and this situation. And now, I must tell you that we are more or less ready to go to Chicago where we will have a new appointment in a Hispanic congregation there and then we are ready to do everything that God will guide us in a different region, but they have some specific situation there and I am happy to help them.

D: Now what I'd like to ask you about is your thoughts on the Hispanic community in the Methodist church here in Florida and also some of your experiences interacting with the other Hispanic people as you have confronted them, really even beginning as far back as the eighties and then into the nineties when you came in.

R: Yeah. My experience has been good, I can say, because even when a person that I have had some bad difficulty with some of the older Cuban pastors that came in the sixties and the seventies, and they had some prejudice about me and so, because they thought that if I remained in Cuba, this was because I was a communist. But I don't have any bad sentiments against them and I came here only to seek what I can do, how we can serve the people, but in general, I have some specific opinion about the Hispanic work in the Florida Annual Conference. In the first place I'd like to say that the Florida Annual Conference, the Bishops and the leaders in all these fifty years, they have been very, very

kind with the Cuban Methodist pastors and the members who came to Florida. They, in general, received them, the Cuban pastors, they gave to them appointments in different Hispanic congregations, they granted them the equitable salary for the Florida pastors, and they granted them the housing allowance that they need. We are very grateful to the leaders and the Annual Conference in general for that love that they have shown to the Cuban pastors' community in Florida. But in my personal opinion, this first group of pastors who came from Cuba when they received a big support from the Board of Missions in New York and so, in my opinion very humbly I will say, they came with the same dependency mentality that they had in Cuba. They didn't come with the plan to do the best work and to have self-support for themselves.

D: When you say dependency, they remembered or they operated under the time before when the Americans were very strong in directing the Cuba Methodist church, and they were eager to continue that when they came here.

R: Here, where the economic level of the life, even the Hispanic people, even when they had not very good work in the beginning, but they received maybe five or ten times more salary than they received in Cuba, and then they, in my opinion, the congregations they must work to have self-support for the Hispanic congregation. But they received everything from the church, they had the guarantee to receive the appointment and so, and in my opinion they don't give the best that they can do for the growth of the church and to their self-support. There is also a very important reality. It is not easy to understand the cultural differences between the Anglo philosophy and the Hispanic philosophy. How to manage and to work a Methodist congregation in the Anglo people and how to manage the Hispanic congregation here in the States; In my opinion there was not a pretty good understanding of this reality and maybe the Anglo Bishop and leaders of the United Methodist church in Florida they cannot intervene a lot inside in the Hispanic style of work, but this is a reality, that this cultural difference don't offer the best for the goal of the Hispanic work in Florida. We can compare the work of the Methodist Cuban pastors with the pastors who came from Cuba and they started independent congregations under the Assembly of God denomination and so, why? Because the Methodist pastors have the guarantee to receive an appointment, to receive the Equitable Salary in spite of the offering that they receive from the congregation. But these other pastors, Assembly of God pastors or independent pastors, maybe they received some help for one or two years, but after that they need to have the self-support from their own congregation, and what happened? That we, the human being, we need to have some challenge to do the best. This is my opinion in this occasion. Then, in the last I'd like to...

D: I have a question for you in the last point. Don't you think that that might be a problem in some cases because if you put pastors in a position where they can basically gin up, or create money for themselves that they might actually become very greedy, in other words, if they know they are not supervised or controlled they could advertise, it could almost be like a money making enterprise on their own, in other words, that might be counterproductive to the religious side of things. In other words, maybe they would be in it for the money, if they were talented at that kind of thing, if they were capable...

R: I am not sure that they, the other pastors in the Assembly of God and the independent pastors, the main motive was to have more money, but the reality was that they knew perfectly that they will have some support, some contribution in a limited time, but they must be able to produce...

D: In other words, you are arguing that sometimes they might become lazy...

R: When you know that you will not have salary problem, housing problem, you will be more lazy. This is not a problem with them, for me this is a human problem in any work. If you are working in a secular enterprise and you know that you will have your work, your salary no matter how much you work and so, you will be more lazy, and in my opinion, honestly this is my opinion, that we, the pastors, we who answer the calling of God, we are human beings, and we need to be very strict with ourselves, so we don't fall in that situation.

D: Ok.

R: The last point in this situation, this is my personal opinion, I am very happy, I am very grateful to the Bishop, all the Bishops in the Florida conference, but in some way, in my personal opinion, I have not done all that in my opinion I would be able to do. Why? Because maybe for the first time the suspicion of the older Methodist pastors about my person and so, maybe for this and other reasons, in my opinion, specially in this actual time when we have new pastors, pastor who grew up with me in Cuba under my leadership, I think that I was able to do some better contribution in the Hispanic pastoral situation in Florida, but, I received with appreciation all the local appointments and so, but I think that...

D: You think that your talents were not fully utilized adequately, or your talents could have been utilized better or more, with more success or more benefit to the church.

R: Yeah, benefits for the church.

D: And you think it's possible that the Bishops were influenced not to encourage you to do bigger and wider participation in the life of the church in Florida, and you are sorry about that?

R: Well, we're sorry but I am in the hands of God and only I can tell you and everyone, I told God as the apostle Paul, "Here I am, what would you like me to do?" And this is my opinion, but really I am a little sorry when I can, many different situation, personal, family situation, situation between some Cuban pastor and congregation that in my opinion I would be able to help them if anybody asked me to help in that situation, and of course, I am here.

The last point is this: my biblical special text. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September in 1953, when I heard the calling from God to the ministry, He gave me a Bible text. It is Mathew chapter

4 verse 19 and 20. The occasion when Jesus was in the Galilee Sea, and he asked to Simon Peter and others, "Come to me and I will make you fishers of men." And they immediately left their task and followed him. This was a special Biblical text that helped me a lot in that occasion. Other text that was very important for my work, specially in Cuba was Isaiah 45, verses 2 and 3, where God said, "I will go before you and I will brake doors of iron and everything and I will be with you." And then, when I was elected as Bishop God gave to me John, chapter 15 verse 16 that said, " You don't elect me, but I elect you and I am putting you to preach and to bring a great harvest and for everything that you ask me I will give to you." These and many other Biblical texts have been a great blessing and support for my personal faith, for my work and for everything in my life. We thank God for that and many other Bible texts that helped me in every situation. Glory be to God! *¡Amén!*