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

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?

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 t [illegible] a

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. Someill*

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,

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.

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 Englufmn10(, bi)-t embut em50.4eprgl

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?

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?

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 “Ple

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 h0.024 571Ch-7(rsa p-6(I)4(hul)-3(dra)4(nd se)4( ))-7(a)-(s)-10(vn ta Cahori)-32c as

D: 1987?

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