

Baptist Press

Cuban pastor who benefited from missions revives CP giving in Miami congregation

By Barbara Denman, posted June 27, 2000 in

HAVANA (BP)—Cuban native Damaris Rodriguez knows first hand the benefits of participating in missions through the Cooperative Program.

Her father serves as pastor of a Havana church that was started by CP-funded missionaries and her grandmother worked with Southern Baptist missionaries to start three Havana missions that are now thriving, Baptist churches.

So, it was no surprise that when Damaris' husband, Felipe, was called as pastor of **Iglesia Bautista Getsemani in Miami**, one of the couple's first priorities was to restore the congregation's long-time commitment to the Cooperative Program.

"We love missions," said **Felipe Rodriguez**, as translated by his wife. "We are tied to missions. We are long-time cooperative missions supporters."

The Spanish-speaking Getsemani church has historically been one of Florida Baptist's leading Cooperative Program giving churches.

Started in 1961 as a mission of Flagler Street Baptist Church, the congregation's first pastor Daniel Rodriguez [no relation to present pastor] led the congregation from mission status to constitution as a church in 1969, instilling "the whole stewardship of life. I believe in tithing and stewardship," he noted.

"I preached tithing to the SBC causes because we have a commitment to promote the SBC way of life," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez left the congregation in 1981 to edit Spanish church materials for LifeWay Christian Resources of the SBC.

In the 1980's, under the leadership of Pastor Benjamin Valdes, the church gave as much as 10 percent to the Cooperative Program.

"This was one of our flagship churches when **Benjamin Valdes** was here," recalled David Lema, director of Spanish missions for the Miami Baptist Association and a former Miami pastor. "He was an icon, and one of my personal heroes. He was sacrificial in everything he did, which probably came as a result of having been in jail in Cuba for 22 years."

Lema noted that several of the younger Hispanic pastors once questioned Valdes about his missions giving. "He would say, 'I trust our convention to do the right thing.' From him I learned you have to trust the people you are in league with."

When Valdes retired, the congregation suffered through hard times, including two congregational splits. Decline was also experienced in the church's missions commitment.

But in the past two years under the leadership of Rodriguez, the church is rebounding.

Located on Northwest Seventh St., and 53rd Ave., the church lies in the shadow of Miami's International Airport. In a high-density neighborhood flanked with majestic palm trees and signs written in Spanish, the church is once again drawing new members from its community.

Resident members number 300 and include first and second generation refugees from Cuba, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Honduras and Mexico. Every week brings new members to the flock.

Sunday morning worship draws a full house. The church must soon decide whether to offer dual morning worship services. Consideration must also be given to whether the church can continue to grow while remaining on its landlocked corner.

The congregation's commitment to the Cooperative Program is once again at 10 percent. Additionally, the members are supporting churches in Honduras, Cuba and a church and home for handicapped children in Nicaragua.

"It is a long tradition for us," said Felipe Rodriquez. "We come from other countries and other churches and know their poor conditions. We can empathize with them."

The church is also looking at sponsoring a new church start.

"This church is no longer looking inward," said Lema. "If a church is willing to go to Honduras, they are willing to go to Miami."

With the pastor's stable and mature leadership, Lema said, the church is poised for future growth. "They are breaking out of their shell, moving on to bigger and better things, coming to a total ministry situation," he affirmed. "The Lord put Felipe here at a very crucial time."