

**Samuel Hernandez’s Winding Road, Listening to the Lord,**

**Led to Bi-vocational Ministry in Columbia**

Samuel Hernandez has been pastor of Columbia’s Iglesia Hispana Dios es Amor for 18 years. It began meeting at First Baptist Church West Columbia and then at Killian Baptist Church, but since 2011 has met with the unanimous endorsement of leaders and members at Sandy Level Baptist Church, in Blythewood.

“When everyone comes together, we have between 40 and 50 in attendance,” Samuel says. “The church is mostly professionals, including engineers, a psychologist, teachers, and young people who have graduated from the University of South Carolina. My wife (Lillian) is a retired pharmacist.” Samuel and Lillian have three daughters and six grandchildren – all living in the Blythewood area.

He said the church has worked to reach other Hispanics in the community – many from Central and South America – but often finds that there is a “a tribal mentality at work. If you don’t belong to the ‘tribe’ then you are out. I have just concentrated on a message of grace, and preaching that is impossible to really live without Christ is us, and that He must live in and through us.

“Everything comes from God,” Samuel says. He should know. His life is a fantastic story of listening to God and responding to Him. He did not set out to be a pastor. He wanted to fly airplanes.

Samuel Hernandez was born in 1954 in Cuba. He grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, Iglesia Bautista Pinar del Río, on the western end of the island. His mother, Maria, was director of the church’s Woman’s Missionary Union.

“As a boy, I had a lot of good Sunday School teachers and young adults in my life,” he says. “They were available to answer my questions and help me when I had a crisis. I was about seven or eight when I made my profession of faith, and then I was baptized when I was 10.

In 1969, when Samuel was 14, he and his mother left Cuba for Spain. His father, Abraham, and sister fled to Miami and then to Puerto Rico.

“The Communists had already arrested my father following my sister’s birthday celebration,” he says. “They thought the celebration was a Bible Study behind closed doors. We also knew that if we were in Cuba when I turned 15, I would have been required to serve in the military.

“I was really wrestling with my faith then,” Samuel says. “I began to question whether the Communists were correct – *that God and the gospel are just a fantasy*. One night, I dreamt that we were at the (church), together, waiting on the Lord to appear. I was in conflict, because I was doubting Jesus. In my dream, I was in the last pew, kind of hiding, and I saw a tall man come to the stage. He turned to face the congregation and looked straight at me. Our eyes met. I knew that He knew what I was struggling with. I woke up in tears, knelt beside my bed and said, ‘I will never doubt again, ever, ever.’ A week later, we received our permits to leave Cuba.

With his mother in Spain, Samuel realized that life was still very difficult for Christians. Under Spain’s military dictator, Francisco Franco, evangelicals were forced to worship in secret.

“No one could be evangelical,” Samuel says. “I helped a pastor in a small church located in a small town. He wrote a commentary on Mark’s gospel and I helped him assemble it in the church basement. Had we been caught, it would have meant jail. It was just like in Cuba, where if they caught with a Bible or worship behind closed doors – you went to jail.”

It was in Spain that the Lord began speaking to Samuel Hernandez. The Cuban refugees in Spain had a special service and Samuel was selected to preach one night. He decided to preach from a gospel tract.

“I practiced by preaching to my mother as she sat facing me in a chair,” he says. “She was bored to death. I was told that I could preach for 30 minutes, but when I spoke at the service I was finished in 5-7 minutes. I was shaking all over, my knees were shaking, and I was trembling. It was awful. I wanted to be a pilot – not a preacher.”

When Samuel was 16, he and his mother flew to New York, were identified as Cuban refugees, received a green card, and became permanent residents. They went on to Puerto Rico and were reunited with Abraham and Samuel’s sister.

“I went to school, all in Spanish, and was working as a delivery and maintenance boy at a local drug store,” he says. “My mother worked in a factory across from our home. I was 18, finishing high school, and woke up one morning sick. It was very strange. I felt terrible, but I had no fever.

“My mother told me to stay home and that she would be across the street at the factory if I needed her. As I lay there, at home, I heard a voice in my mind say, ‘You are going to be a pastor’ and just like that I felt much better. I began arguing with the Lord, telling him I wanted to fly airplanes. The Lord said, ‘Okay’ and immediately I felt bad again. There was a lot of discomfort, but no pain. This went back and worth for 20-30 minutes. Finally, I surrendered. I fell on my knees and prayed – all that awful feeling went away and did not come back.”

When Samuel’s mother came to check on him, he explained what had happened.

“My mother fell to her knees, raised her hands and said, ‘Thank you, Lord, you have answered my prayers.’”

Samuel Hernandez then contacted the director of missions for the Puerto Rico Baptist Association, and visited the next day with an associational missionary.

“I explained my calling and, because of my background, I was knowledgeable in Scripture,” Samuel says. “I began to do pulpit supply. Some of those churches suffered as I learned to preach and the association licensed me to preach.”

At 20 years old, facing tough economic challenges in Puerto Rico, Samuel joined the United States Army so that he could have a job. He was stationed at Fort Lewis in Tacoma, WA, where he spent many days and nights on guard duty.

“One night, it was very cold, and we had to guard an ammunition truck,” Samuel says. “It was so cold that I watched a little pot of water become ice. It was my partner’s turn to get some rest and so I was alone. I heard this voice, in Spanish, calling my name. It said, ‘What are you doing here? When I did call you to guard a truck?’ I responded that I thought it was something I should do to support my family. The voice said, ‘What I have asked you to do has nothing to do with this.’”

“It became clear to me,” Samuel says, “that I was there, freezing to death, in the U.S. Army, guarding a truck and that it was so much less than what the Lord had called me to do. I recommitted to His calling because He is worth it. So, I went back to Square One with my calling.”

At Parkland First Baptist Church, in Tacoma, Samuel talked with his pastor and by the end of his Army service was ordained by the church and helped plant a church, Primera Iglesia Bautista, in Seattle. After being discharged from the Army, Samuel returned in 1983 to Puerto Rico and became pastor of a church that had split from another church. He also took a job at his uncle’s pharmacy where he worked until it closed.

From there he pastored a more established church for 12 years, and during that time finished a master’s degree in a program that was in cooperation with the Puerto Rico Theological Baptist Seminary and Luther Rice Seminary, in Lithonia, GA.

“My oldest daughter was living in Blythewood and was married,” he said. “I was in a Christian counseling program and visited her. My interest began to shift from Puerto Rico to South Carolina. I spoke to Lillian, my wife, and she agreed that the Lord was calling us here to South Carolina. So we waited a year, saved some money, and began to get things ready to move so that we could work in Hispanic ministry here.

“We had everything ready to move but could not sell our home in Puerto Rico,” he says. “We had arranged for an apartment on Polo Road in Columbia, and were never dissuaded to change or cancel our plans. The day we moved our things, a person came to us and said he heard we were selling our home. He looked around and returned with his wife. They told us they were going to buy it.

“The Lord sold that house in Puerto Rico,” Samuel says.

Initially, in 2002, Iglesia Hispana Dios es Amor, Columbia, SC, met at First Baptist Church West Columbia, but the drive from the Northeast community made it hard for Samuel and his family to do the evangelistic work necessary in the community. That led to the move to Killian Baptist Church, and then on to Sandy Level, in Blythewood. As a bi-vocational pastor, Samuel also owns a Le Peep restaurant in Columbia.

“Everything comes from God,” Samuel says. “I know that. He is the source and Christ is our life. I’ve learned that being obedient to God is a gift from God, and He wants us to have a life that is Christ-dependent and not self-dependent.”

Samuel Hernandez never learned to fly though that’s certainly debatable.