

Oral History Interview: Ulises Perez

Interviewee: Ulises Perez [Translated by Umberto Cruz Guardarrama; only the English translations are included in this transcript. For the Spanish original responses, please consult the audio version.]

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus

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Doris M. This is Doris Malkmus. I am recording Ulises Perez at the MCC 2025 General Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Humberto Cruz Guardarrama will be translating for him. Humberto, can you ask Ulises how he came to be ordained by MCC? And he could explain his childhood and education and experiences. Thank you.

Ulises P. Sure, I can help you, I can tell. It's about...my life was ups and downs all the time, and I can certainly tell you that I arrived to MCC as a Catholic. I was a Catholic person, and when I was a child I grew up Catholic. And when I was a child I was really full of happiness when I was around that religious environment.

Doris M. Where was he a child and when was he born?

Ulises P. I was born in Caracas, Venezuela, on June 19, 1966. So my religious formation, my religious degree was actually in my home country. And during my youth I was a missionary in all Venezuela, so that gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of people from all backgrounds, from towns to cities. I was a children's teacher, and youth, and adults. So I got a small knowledge of everybody around me.

Doris M. And was he trained as a priest or as a missionary?

Ulises P. I was a missionary for the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Venezuela. And then eventually there came other questions in my life about myself, about my sexuality that I didn't understand very well. I had so many questions and I had so much to learn. I didn't have enough college education to even understand and answer myself. That didn't stop me to keep doing what I was doing and keep working with people and keep understanding them. I tried to take them out of their trouble and with my little knowledge I was able to help others.

I was riding in public transportation. I was on boats and little boats around the rivers. I was near the tribes, the Venezuelan tribes, indigenous tribes in the Amazon of Venezuela. I was in the big cities as well, and very small towns as well. But everybody has the same problems as me, so that took me to study more.

But I wanted to see how the world was seeing me, and I wanted to focus

on how the world was seeing me as a person. Until 1991 I was receiving a scholarship that I didn't expect. I profoundly underrated myself, and I didn't want to take this question. But then I had the courage to do it, because I had lost everything. And by that time I had been working for ten years for the Air Force in Venezuela.

Doris M. Was he stationed in a city?

Ulises P. Yeah, it was in Maracay, Venezuela, the military base. So I got sick. My kidneys had a failure, so I was thinking I was going to die. I didn't know what to do. I went to visit a lot of doctors. And one of those last nights that I was thinking I was going to die, I went to church, and we sang.

Doris M. What kind of church?

Ulises P. A Pentecostal church. And we sang Cuan Grande Hacer, so how big is him, how mighty is he. So the following day all my body start healing. I had a rash all over my body. I was—

Doris M. Swelled.

Ulises P. —swelled, and all that starts disappearing. Everything was swelled, especially my ears, and the skin was actually broken, and it was bleeding, and all my body was like that because of my kidney failure. After that visit at the church my body started feeling better, and there were little changes in my life so that scholarship came to my hands. And with that scholarship they said that I could come to Harlingen, Texas, to a biblical training.

Doris M. Does he leave the air force to do this?

Ulises P. I had already left because of my illness, so I was in there already. So I didn't have any money. I had my passport still updated from five years before, but I was looking at the scholarship and I couldn't believe it. But I don't have money to go to the United States.

Doris M. And he doesn't speak English.

Ulises P. And I speak English, too. [*Laughter.*] A person told me God calls you and told you that they're going to get you out of here. It doesn't matter whatever you are thinking, God has called you. So I started walking in faith and what was on my hands.

So I went to the base, back to the military base. I told my supervisor I got this scholarship but I don't know what to do. I don't have money, I don't have a U.S. visa, and I don't have anything, and they want me to go to this school. And the supervisor told me you're very crazy, [*laughter*] you don't know anything. You need to go to Caracas to the Ministry of Defense and

they have a check. They're going to cover everything that you have there. And I said, really?

Doris M. And is this scholarship for religious education or for air force education?

Ulises P. No, it was religious education.

Doris M. And the Department of Defense was going to pay for it?

Ulises P. Yes, because I was working for 13 years in the force, and I retired, but I didn't expect that there was money from that for me. So that was one of the first miracles that happened to me. Two months later I was ready for it. I had my plane ticket, my visa and everything to go.

Doris M. And is he self-identified as gay?

Ulises P. Right now? At that time?

Doris M. At that time.

Ulises P. No. I didn't feel that it was necessary. My life was very normal.

Doris M. No children, no wife?

Ulises P. No. That was going to happen later on, but not at this time. And in October of 1991 I arrived to the United States and I start my journey in biblical studies.

Doris M. How did it go while speaking Spanish?

Ulises P. We had translators and different pastors from different churches, different traditions, different cultures.

Doris M. And the name of the Bible school?

Ulises P. Tell my People.

Doris M. Pentecostal?

Ulises P. Christian.

Doris M. Evangelical?

Ulises P. Nondenominational. [Pause]. I realized with the school that God doesn't work with your body's health, it works with your soul's, so that opened my mind, and I started realizing human problems and how our heart is so damaged.

Doris M. Trauma?

Ulises P. It's more like yeah, the trauma that—

Doris M. Soul trauma?

Ulises P. Yes. So it also allowed me to look differently at my life, but I still have struggle with my Pentecostal traditions, and also for my family. That was a lot of pressure on me.

Doris M. And pressure to not come out?

Ulises P. Yeah. The traditional life between a man and a woman. So in 1993 I got married with my wife, and I lived with her 15 years.

Doris M. Children?

Ulises P. Yes, one.

Doris M. And did he work as a minister?

Ulises P. Yes.

Doris M. U.S., Venezuela?

Ulises P. In the United States. So I keep working in the church with my wife and I start working as a child pastor for five years.

Doris M. Where?

Ulises P. Iglesia Asamblea de Dios, Assembly of God in Houston, Texas.

Doris M. And Spanish-speaking.

Ulises P. And I started learning at a biblical school.

Doris M. He was teaching at a biblical school or taking classes?

Ulises P. I was taking classes. So I have previous studies in my country, in Venezuela, and I needed to have equivalents of the studies, so I had to study, I had to graduate in that church. So in 1998 I finished my GED.

Doris M. Oh, dear. *[Laughter]*
I have a question. Isn't this tradition very homophobic? Don't they pronounce that you go to hell if you are gay?

Ulises P. Yes, of course. There was a lot of homosexuality, but it was hidden, it was not out there. But he was fine because I was with my wife. At that moment he didn't have a child. He got a child eventually, but later, but not in these five years. And it was only until I got to this experience working with kids that I realized how many lies they were telling to people who were homosexuals that they're going to get if they were keeping

doing with that behavior. That put outside a lot of people that were in the church to go outside. They felt that they did not belong there. They were going back and forth, but they were living a very bitter life, like—

Doris M. Bitterness?

Ulises P. Bitterness. They were crying because they were not feeling enough dignified to be next to God or close to God. And I was including myself. We were thinking that we failed God. We were the cursed people, and we don't have any chance in life. In the middle of all of that, my kid was born, but I was taking some decisions in my life. I wanted to tell my wife that I wanted to divorce, but I will never fail my son, I'm going to be there for him. She had also troubles, and I had a very horrible life with her for these years. And that's the reason why also I took that decision. It really hurt. I was on the floor. I cried like never before. I took all my diplomas and all my books. I sold everything because I thought my life was ended.

I was working with the Baptist churches and other Christian churches. By that time I was already a teacher at the biblical studies. I was a singer in the church, I was a preacher, but I was feeling so lost, even worse than the devil, and I thought I need to leave, I need to die. When that starts coming out, slowly I met Geraldo, so we have now 17 years together. [*Laughs.*]

Doris M. When he met Geraldo he was divorced with a child? [2008]

Ulises P. I was in the process of divorcing. I was thinking of making distance in work, no churches for me. That was over. I was living my life happy because I was not thinking about God. But when I was having a business by selling clothes, next to my business there was a lady, and she wanted to commit suicide, and when I approach her she was playing a guitar and she was singing a Christian song, but she was feeling miserable. And it was there, when I start talking to her so she didn't commit suicide, and I gave her hope, but I was quiet, because I didn't know what to do. And one day Geraldo said I want to get married. [*Laughs.*]

Doris M. To Geraldo?

Ulises P. Yeah. So I finished my divorce. I was thinking on just working.

Doris M. What year, about?

Ulises P. Is 2014. I was selling cars. I was not having anything in mind for churches or people, I was just in the business market. I was just trying to fill their credit to the people, and telling everyone how good or bad they were doing with their credit scores, so I was a pastor of credit, helping people. So Geraldo found MCC. He says this is where we can get married. So I met Rev. Michael Diaz, the MCC, and it was he who wanted to marry us. So my story wasn't even started yet at that church, at MCC.

Doris M. And it's the English-speaking MCC?

Ulises P. Yes. When I was married to Geraldo I was singing, a song very old that I was singing only when I was in my youth. [I will say the song's words] "Have in life a goal, walk with your forefront up straight, find a star in the darkness, and keep sailing like a captain with the forefront up, breaking the air. I know that life goes on and ends, but I know that I will obtain from life the sub—

Doris M. Sublime nectar.

Ulises P. —that invites you to triumph, invites you to win." So Michael Diaz was listening to my song—why are you not singing in my church? You're a very good singer. So on Sunday I went there and I sang that song. A month later I was invited again and I sang again, and the people stand up. And so the pianist started saying "you are a preacher!" No-no-no, I'm not, bye. [*Laughs.*] Because I didn't think that there was going to be a Latin ministry here.

So I was in the gym. God told me go to Rev. Troy and tell him what I'm trying to say. Here is my life, here is my talent, I'm going to put it in your hands without charging anything. So I went there and I went and told him, and that's how I started.

Doris M. I heard the word Troy, or was it Lord?

Ulises P. No, Troy.

Doris M. Troy Perry?

Ulises P. No, Troy [Rich?] from Chicago.

Doris M. Thank you. And?

Ulises P. So I started looking at my life differently. I started studying again. I started studying biblical studies master's degree, and started realizing with a different panorama, like different view than ever before and that God loves everyone.

So I started looking for a name that has involved everyone. You have to call your congregation a name, what is the connection with you in your church. So I started thinking, well, I'm living in Houston, Texas, and there's a bigger percentage of people that speak Spanish, and they have a lot of problems like I did that they are hidden in their churches. They don't confront themselves to get closer to God, so they ruin their lives and ruin others' lives, so we have to heal.

So I called my church La Casa de Todos so everyone can come. I don't care their religion, their color, I don't care if you speak Spanish, English,

or Korean, or African. Everyone here is welcome. And it's here where I start teaching about God that doesn't focus on your sexuality, but in your heart, that wants to clean it and turn the light in you.

Doris M. And Christian?

Ulises P. Mm-hmm.

Doris M. How long ago?

Ulises P. Eight years.

Doris M. 2015?

Ulises P. 2017 it started.
[*Interruption.*]

Doris M. I want to make sure this is... Very good. I'm going to take out the time that that happened. And where we stopped was a church for everyone, and I said Christian, and you said yes, Christian, from anywhere in the world.

Ulises P. Anywhere. It's Christian, it's Catholic, it's everyone. Not important the religion.

Doris M. Ask him how that works for his congregation.

Ulises P. For many of them, or for some of them it wasn't easy, but I want to do something different. Because when you're talking about sexuality there's a lot of people who have a lot of issues, so I try to bring a message that is more refreshing so they can experience the word of God in a different way. And I was telling them how God heals you and heals your body and your soul.

So I remember one of the first people who arrived was in a wheelchair, and God healed her. She's no longer coming to the church, but she left the church walking. That was the signal if that person, if someone is healed they won't have a sexual mind in their heads, they're going to be more close to God. And I just wanted to have everybody who comes with us feel welcome.

So every Sunday I pray for the people who come to the church that this message, not only in the songs, but in the preaching, comes to their minds and heals those people. And we have transgender, homosexuals, and heterosexual. And we have kids, too. We have seven kids in the church. We have couples and they have babies as well. It is a congregation multi...multisexual, all.

Doris M. How does MCC support this church?

Ulises P. They give us space. They give us some donations. They give us AV equipment.

Doris M. And he has been ordained by MCC?

Ulises P. By December I will receive my master's degree. By then I can get ordained. I'm just being a local pastor for the church.

Doris M. Does he have an income from the church?

Ulises P. I just get a weekly contribution.

Doris M. You are a saint.

Ulises P. [*Laughs.*]

Doris M. And does he have a brotherhood with other MCC people or even other welcoming churches in Houston?

Ulises P. Not really. Despite all the story I was telling you, I still keep communication with the Asamblea de Dios.

Doris M. Pentecostal.

Ulises P. But I'm never going to say I'm gay or anything. I talk to them. I tell them about what God is doing in my church. They know, but we don't talk about it. There's some that accept me and there's some others who don't. We had a [Pentacostal] pastor, José Flores. He's my translator when I preach at the MCC English. And he's totally Pentecostal, and he's totally straight, with a wife and kids. And when he comes to my church he feels very happy with everyone, and he translates happily. We never talk about it, but we are together.

Doris M. I agree. There are many. Thank you for this interview. I love to hear this story. I'm going to turn off the tape now.

[*End of interview.*]