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Ponstein, Lambert J Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College I and II

Conrad Strauch Jr.

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LIVING HERITAGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Dr. Lamber J. Ponstein

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
1978

INTRODUCTION

The Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project consists of a series of interviews conducted during the summer of 1977 by Nancy A. Swinyard, and the summer of 1978 by Conrad J. Strauch with persons who, in years past, were members of the faculty and administration of Hope College. Upon the completion of each session, the taped conversation was transcribed and then edited by both the interviewer and the interviewee for clarity. While accuracy is desirable, the viewpoint of the interviewee is maintained. Some alterations were suggested by the interviewer during the interviews and in later correspondences, but the researcher will discover discrepancies between the interviews themselves and with published sources of information. Therefore, the researcher must be aware that these differences exist, and seek to understand the perspective from which all statements were made. Tapes of all interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives.

No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. No two people share identical viewpoints, and the separation by time from the interviewee's experiences on campus can sometimes intensify this divergence.

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean for the Humanities, and Mr. William K. Anderson, Vice President for Business and Finance, this project would not have become a reality. Dr. Elton J. Bruins, though busy with his own pursuits, willingly lent his guidance and support. The success of this project can be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees, each gracious, receptive and cooperative.

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PREFACE

Interviewee: Dr. Lambert J. Ponstein

Interview I: May 30, 1978

Room 326, Lubbers Hall, Hope College

Interview II: June 6, 1978

Room 326, Lubbers Hall, Hope College

Interviewer: Mr. Conrad Strauch, Jr.

LAMBERT JOHN PONSTEIN

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Lambert Ponstein was born in the Netherlands on March 2, 1912. He moved to America where he attended the Grand Haven Christian School and the Grand Haven High School. He served in the armed forces during WWII, after which he attended Hope College receiving his BA in 1948. Also in that year he married Joan and they have had three daughters: Mary, Susan, and Nancy.

After graduation he taught in Newaygo for a year. He then attended Western Theological Seminary and was a part time instructor at Hope. Upon receiving his BD he joined the Hope College staff full time. From that time until his retirement in 1977 he was part of the Religion Department faculty. During his years at Hope he also worked on some graduate study. In 1959 he received the STM from the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin, and in 1974 received his D. Min. from Vanderbilt University.

Dr. Ponstein has had two articles published in the Hope College Alumni Magazine; "Person to Person" in 1962, and "God, Man and the World" in 1966.

Dr. Ponstein was very cooperative during our interview and the work that followed and he has helped to shed light on some of the events that occurred during his time at Hope. In these interviews he recalls his student days after the war and the changes caused by the GI influx. He talks about what the campus was like during the student unrest of the '60's. Dr. Ponstein is candid and willing to express the way he viewed the three administrations he served under. And throughout he tells of the concept of Hope as being a Christian college.

INTERVIEW I

CONRAD: Well, you came to Hope College as a student in 1944-45

PONSTEIN: No, right after the war, 1946.

CONRAD: Then did you work under an accelerated program to get out by 1948?

PONSTEIN: Yes, I finished college here in about two and a half years. There were times when I took 21 hours a semester, one time I took 23 hours in a semester, so by the end of the summer of 1948, I completed my work. I started here in February of '46 and I finished at the end of summer in 1948. Then I had my degree. So you see that it's not difficult, in fact not that difficult at all. That was the time that all the GIs were coming back. And the fact of the matter is that the college jumped in population because all of these GIs came in, for the most part, at the beginning of the second semester. A lot of those fellows had been away from school for three or four years, they were all older, probably 23, 24 and older than that; and by the way we had some girls who had been in the women's army corp and navy- the same situation. But now what I wanted to say is that these fellows were determined to get their education and be on their way. They were well disciplined and people who were interested in getting an education, and they didn't have time to fool around. Just as an example of what happened, GIs wouldn't wear the green beanies we had, they thought this was silly and they didn't want to do this; and what's more it was very difficult to get GIs into fraternities, they thought they were somewhat of a waste of time. Later on those began to come back and some of them did of course, but a lot of the fellows didn't want to be bothered with that. It was very interesting for the fellows also, and some girls, because in classes you had people who had been all over the world. It did not make a great difference what you were talking about, let's say you were in history class and began discussing a certain segment of the world- someone had been there and could tell you

exactly what it was like, including the islands in the Pacific and so on, which made it very interesting. Not only that, but since these fellows had considerable experience in life, some of them had been officers in the army, and had men serve under them and so on, their attitude was quite different too; there was a good matter of respect from these fellows. On the other hand there were the usual college pranks, but you would have to say that they were well disciplined, on the job, and did their work. They got along very well. It was a very interesting time, the fact of the matter is when the GIs finally had left the college campus and we were starting to get more high school students, that is just about all high school students, it meant a bit of a change in teaching methods on the part of the professors. They had to drop things a bit. They couldn't teach at the same high level. You could presuppose with some of these GIs who were older that they already had some basic information.

CONRAD: There were also a lot of administrative changes going on at the time because of the influx, how did that affect the student activities; the over crowding in classrooms and in dorms and stuff like that?

PONSTEIN: Oh yes, we had some Saturday classes at that time. Prior to that time when the school was small it was not unusual to have classes only in the morning. Now classes became larger with classes all day, sometimes in the evening. And of course there was a large influx of new faculty, also people which they had to get part-time. There were a great number of these things happening. It is very interesting that the college had always been small and people who taught here felt of the college as, you might say, an institution very close to them. Let me give you an example. I remember when we came in, I and my brother came to school together incidentally, we were signing up for classes, sections were filled. You know what happens now if a section is filled. It has to go through all the administrative procedure

and nobody can teach it because "I'm already teaching nine hours," or maybe less. It wasn't true at that time. The fact of the matter is an instructor would say "we'll open up another section and I'll teach it this semester and Joe or someone, you will teach it next semester." And then afterwards they could tell the registrar about what they had done. They simply did it, and by the way there was no extra for that, you simply did it because you knew the students had to be taught. It was that sense of a family attitude that was present at that time, and a very good attitude I would say. As the college grew it tended to lose some of that. And of course it is hard to believe that right around that time or just prior to that we scarcely had anything you could call an administration. There was a President, and he had a secretary. We didn't have many secretaries, not only that, professors didn't have secretaries either. And for the most part many of the professors didn't have offices. All these offices you see around here came later, but then there were no offices, here and there a fellow might have an office. The education department had a place for meeting, the people in the chemistry building had a little place there; but a number of people had no offices. You might make use of a room wherever you could find one. This was not an unusual thing, or two or three people got together. For example the registrar, admissions office I should say, was very small. At one time there was only one person and the secretary. We didn't have anything else. We didn't have the deans. We did have a dean of men and a dean of women who also taught, but as far as the kind of administrative staff that you see now, that wasn't present at the time. It came because as the college grew all these other things came along with it and of course the college was subject to a great many governmental procedures later on such as government forms for GI's' tuition, books, etc. . Also slowly on as you get all kinds of administrative staff, you get all kinds of paper work and that

slowly evolved, but we didn't have that at one time, not at all. We had a very small library. The library was in Graves Hall and it wasn't very large, it was that large room that you see now that is used for a lecture hall, a reading room with stacks around the edge.

CONRAD: So what do you think attracted veterans to Hope College?

PONSTEIN: Well, I think it was that a number of these veterans came from Reformed Church backgrounds or they lived in this community, Grand Rapids, or around this area, perhaps not much different than at the present time. And of course you must remember that thousands of veterans were flocking to the colleges and universities because of the GI bill. A veteran could go to school and have his education paid, which included not only one's tuition, but also one's books. Veterans didn't buy books they simply went down to the bookstore and signed for them. The Veteran's Administration allotted a certain sum of money for books. Veterans had a certain income also, GIs had tuition and books paid, but also a certain amount of money a month for living expenses. I don't think people realize the number of veterans that were in the schools after the war.

CONRAD: After you finished here you took a year off, then you came back to go to Western.....

PONSTEIN: After I finished here I taught high school in Newaygo for a year. Then while I was there Dr. Lubbers, who was then president of the college offered me a job to teach speech here, and it's very interesting because I wasn't a speech major. He offered me a position to teach speech, but I didn't want to teach full time because I had intended to go back to seminary full time. I was teaching English at Newaygo High School. So after thinking that over for a little while he came back and said, "Well how about doing this part time?" So I taught speech part time here with a young fellow by the name of Don Buteyn who is now a minister in the

Presbyterian Church, he use to be a minister in the Reformed Church, and we both taught speech. We coached debate, took care of discussion groups and so on. We were doing this part time. It might be interesting to know what we got paid for that. When we first started we got \$75.00 a month for that and then later on we got \$100.00 a month, and actually we taught about what would be considered a half-load at the present. We were doing this part time and had quite a few students. At the same time I was attending seminary and carrying a full load over there. The same thing was true of Don Buteyn. He also was a student at Western. The experience was very worthwhile and one I enjoyed very much. I remember having people like Guy Vander Jagt in my class, the Congressman, very excellent people, and it was a good experience for me. Incidentally, I should put it this way, the last year I was in seminary Dr. Osterhaven who was teaching in the Religion Department, was offered a position at the seminary for teaching in the Theological Department and so I talked to Dr. Lubbers about this and went right from seminary to Hope College and started teaching here the first year out of seminary. The first year I was here I taught some speech and I taught in the Religion Department. By the second year I switched over completely and was there during my entire career. Later on I went back to school. I went to Oberlin at the graduate School of Theology there, I spent a year there and had a very enjoyable time.

CONRAD: So you served as a professor then under three Presidents?

PONSTEIN: Yes, Dr. Lubbers, and Dr. VanderWerf and Dr. Van Wylen and of course we had a few interim periods in there, a few years when we had deans or a chancellor who was operating.

CONRAD: Would you say that the three men pretty much saw the purpose of Hope College as the same or greatly different?

PONSTEIN: I think they were greatly different. Dr. Lubbers came to us right

after the war, about the same time most of these GIs came in. He was here at the time that the college was expanding rapidly, because even after the GIs were gone we continued to expand because more people were going to college. While he was here there was a certain amount of building that was done. He was here at a rather hectic time because here were all these students coming in and it was necessary to recruit faculty, and to find housing for these people and to pick up buildings here and there that could be used for classrooms, because we really didn't have enough space to accommodate all these people. It was amazing though how many students we were able to accommodate, with the very, shall we say poor and inadequate facilities we did have, which says something. We got along quite well, but it was a matter of using these buildings from the early morning through the evening. One time we even tried 7:00 classes, but that didn't work out very well, but we did try. For example, housing, a great many students lived in private homes around town. I remember going out looking for places for students to live, just rapping on doors. Later we did this by advertising on the radio and in newspapers. People would call in and we would go over and check the rooms to see whether they were adequate and get a list of them so students could go out and find a place to stay. What we did have were army barracks that were east of the science building and we had them where Kollen Hall is. A great many of the GIs stayed in the army barracks. We also had families stay in those army barracks with children all around the place and a playground. Some of these fellows had children, and so that situation was quite different also. But this was a period when Dr. Lubbers had to, shall we say, almost make do with whatever he could get a hold of in order to bring in faculty to take care of the students and give them housing and so on.

CONRAD: Would you say that his purpose for Hope College was still the same as

that which previously to his administration?

PONSTEIN: Yes, though I think what had happened over the years was that the notion of a Christian college had probably lost some of its original meaning. If you were to go back to the Articles of Incorporation of the college you would notice that those original articles indicated that the college was to be open to people regardless of their race or creed, but that the instruction was to be within the framework, understanding, of the Scriptures and the creeds of the Reformed Church, the three creeds of the Reformed Church. Now that didn't mean that these people understood that the education was to be simply a religious education in every class, but the idea was that the principles, the framework let us say, was that one ought to see life as under the lordship of God in Jesus Christ, that was the idea. They were quite well aware of that and I think later on there was a tendency to move away from that so that it didn't make a great deal of difference if you were here or somewhere else where they didn't have that point of view. That's what can happen, and I think did happen. We slowly on had people who came in, and some of that of course we had after WWII, people who had no interest in the Christian faith and who of necessity wouldn't be able to put into operation some of the ideas in the original Articles of Incorporation. After all it's people that make the college and not buildings. It's the kind of faculty that you have that will determine what kind of college you will have and you can't even do that by putting nice things into the Articles of Incorporation. They have to be implemented and so we already had some of those things happening over the years and then later on as the college grew we got even more of that. But, I don't think that one can say that this came with one president. I think this is the kind of thing that had been going on slowly over the years. After all if you have a philosophy of education it has to be spelled out pretty well, and if you have this philosophy of

education, that means in hiring you must apply it. Every time you hire someone you say, here is my philosophy of education can that fellow or that lady carry that out? That will make a great deal of difference as to what kind of a college you are going to have.

CONRAD: Would you say that Lubbers had to hire a lot of faculty because a lot of those appointed under Dimment had either ~~either~~ died or retired, and do you think that maybe they no longer looked as closely to this philosophy in the hiring process?

PONSTEIN: Well he had to hire a lot of people simply because of the fact that the college was expanding and we did get a number of very fine people at the time, but there was a great turnover because people didn't have to stay here if they didn't want to. There were plenty of jobs available at the time and therefore you did have some difficulty finding faculty, no doubt about that.

CONRAD: As far as the administration went, you spoke earlier of how there were a lot of governmental processes that they had to go through, would that have created a lot of the red tape that began to develop under Lubber's presidency?

PONSTEIN: That was one thing that increased the administrative staff, though the administrative staff kept growing slowly for over a period, of about 20 - 25 years, and I think that after him it began to speed up; though even during his time, since the school expanded rapidly we had a dean, and later on a vice-president, and so we began to get more people working in various offices, and slowly on this whole matter of secretaries came in. After awhile we had secretaries in offices all over the place.

CONARD: After Lubbers came President VanderWerf, and I had read that a lot of people worried that he was so much a professional and a scientist that he would start veering away from the liberal arts attitude of the college,

but that he had reassured the faculty and supporters of the college that this wouldn't happen. Most people were assured that it wouldn't happen but how about you, did you see any of that occurring?

PONSTEIN: Well, yes, in this way; I doubt if the faculty really worried too much about that when Dr. VanderWerf first came, I don't really think they thought about that too much, maybe some people did, but I don't think that was general. It was after he was here for a little while, since he was of course a scientist and he had been chairman of the Chemistry Department over in Kansas, that he began to expand the sciences so that we picked up a number of new people in the chemistry department and he brought in a new department, the Geology Department, and we had new people coming into the biology department. All these departments were expanded; physics was expanded greatly in spite of the fact that we never had a great many physics majors at the time. You must remember for example that for years, and that was even when we had quite a few students, we had a chemistry department which had about four people in it, a number of majors then also. And some of these men, especially in the biology department - we had a biology department with very few faculty in it, but some of those men were teaching enormous loads. I can think of the early years when Norm Rieck and a man by the name of Phil Crook taught enormous loads. But, they were willing to do so, and it was later on that these departments were expanded tremendously. Of course there was a certain amount of friction because some of the people, I'm sure in the humanities, looking at certain departments and noticing they were expanding, were a little upset about this, but on the other hand I must say that other departments began to expand also under VanderWerf. There were a number of people who were brought into other departments. VanderWerf was very much interested in seeing departments grow, he wanted a larger faculty, very much interested in size. I suppose that part of this^{w/6.5} because he came from

a university background where money was not too much of a problem, at least it was tax money, and so it was there to spend.

I think the criticism ultimately came because of the people we were hiring. Many of these people had no notion whatsoever of a Christian college or a Christian philosophy of education. I don't think anybody really paid much attention to it, the faculty or administration. This became quite obvious because the people who did have some feeling for this matter of a Christian education began to feel that they had very little voice in the college, and this of course brought on some difficult feelings, there's no doubt about that, and these surfaced during this time. Dr. VanderWerf, I must say on the other hand, must be given credit, at least from a faculty point of view, that he probably did more than anyone to increase salaries for the faculty. During his term here we received fringe benefits which were excellent benefits, which we had been trying to get, but hadn't been able to get for quite a long time. I think I must give him credit for that and a certain amount of building that was done.

He was a man who was, as far as personality is concerned, a very independent fellow which may have been part of the difficulty. He was a rather hard fellow to get to, not that it was hard to go into the office and talk to him. I used to go in and talk to him quite often. But you always were wondering if you could get something across to him. He was doing so many things, so busy with details and so on, that maybe he just couldn't do all those things. All of that ultimately piled up, a lot of little things piled up that way, but he was a man I must say who did a great deal for the welfare of the faculty during the time that he was here.

CONRAD: You spoke of a lot of difficult feeling arising, what type of feelings were these and what were they from?

PONSTEIN: I think that was because they thought the college was becoming

oriented pretty well toward the sciences and away from a liberal arts point of view, and there were people, and I don't want to say that there were many because after all the faculty had changed considerably and a great many of these people had no notion of this at all, who saw their whole philosophy of a Christian college going by the board. Once again I don't want to say that happened necessarily during VanderWerf's time, I think this is only the culmination of what had been going on over a long period of time. Certainly one would have to say that it could be related to faculty just as well because during that period of time the chairmen of departments had a great deal of input as to who was to be hired and they weren't very careful about that either. There were departments that were very careful about this, for example the Mathematics and the Phys. Ed. departments. These people pretty well maintained a singular attitude as to what kind of people they wanted and were able to do so. I think this is something for which we ought to give these people credit. They carried this right on down to the present day, but there were difficulties between the various departments. What happened is this, a department got a new man, so another department said "They got a new man we will too," which was not too hard to do. You put in more sections, you put in new courses. That takes more people and so what you get is a kind of educational featherbedding.

That kept going on, if they were going to get a man, then we were going to get a man too. It was a very bad situation, but it did happen. This did happen and you can always make a case for it. For example just to show you how that happened, if you would want to check this for yourself, you can go back over the catalog, go back to when we had 1200 students after the war, and what we have let us say even at the present time, and you will notice how the number of courses has increased ^adramatically. Of course as the number of courses has increased, even though the number of students doesn't grow that

fast, you also have a larger number of faculty people in order to teach them. And there was also during that period of time the notion that one ought to have small classes, and that was happening in all departments. Some departments had very small classes. In fact I did a study on that, if you want a copy of that, ask Dr. Bruins. He has all that material. I did studies on the number of courses, I did it on class size, I did a number of these; and Dr. Bruins has copies of all of these in case you would like to look at them and see how they fit in with the period.

But that's the kind of thing that happened, which also meant that costs went up. But with the growth of the college and the large number of people coming on the faculty who didn't know anything of the history of the college, and here I probably ought to point out that an institution has a history, has tradition, these things began to happen. When people come in, and then after one or two years you let them do as they please, they begin to operate the college and know nothing of the traditions, what went on in the past or what were the principles involved, what was the philosophy involved. These people are going to go their own way as to what they have seen somewhere else and the college in that way rapidly loses its philosophy, its traditions, its principles. I know this is the case and it is not always the fault of these people who were hired either because I have talked to colleagues who were that type. I asked did anyone ever explain to you what we were like, did anyone ever say something about this college. They said "No! Nobody ever told me anything like that and I didn't know anything about it," and so on. I even had some fellows say, "If I had known, I might not have even come here." One has to put on the line, "This is the kind of college we are, these are our principles, this is our philosophy, " and so on, so a man comes here knowing what it's all about and this wasn't necessarily true. Especially if very quickly these people take over the college becoming

chairman of a department let us say, and then having the right to go ahead and hire people. Who knows what is going to happen? I want to get this in here so that you can see how historically these things take place. Nothing happens overnight and nothing happens because somebody says, "I'm going to change this." Nobody probably ever said that, maybe they didn't even have that in mind. It is because one begins to follow a certain trend and you bring in people, and people make those changes, and they do this sometimes out of ignorance because they know nothing of what the tradition was. Once a tradition is gone and forgotten, or unknown, you very quickly begin a new tradition, something which is quite different and this is what happened here also. If you would go through the American history of colleges you would find that this has happened not only here but in many places, a great many colleges. After all a great many colleges and universities began with the same philosophy we have, with the same basic notions of education, and probably still have it in their articles of incorporation, and one wouldn't know one thing about it today, it is all gone.

CONRAD: Would you say that under President VanWynen with his new push for restoring the Christian aspects of the college you see a change occurring back?

PONSTEIN: Yes, Dr. VanWynen had done a great deal. You'll notice something. The changes come with an administrator who has a notion of what kind of college he wants. Then has it not only in his mind but also verbalizes that notion, "This is what I envision for Hope College." Now when one wants to do something like that and you take over an institution that has been going in another direction for quite sometime, and not only under one man, but you can go back, quite a way, in fact I don't know how far back you can go because I don't know all of that, I didn't live through some of that, but you can go back quite a way, you can't make rapid changes.

Not only that, this is an interesting thing, right after the war there was a long period of 15 or more years when if you were a college professor and you wanted to move, no problem, you could get a job anywhere. There was a shortage of people with degrees who could teach in colleges, so if you didn't like it, you moved on. This meant of course that this could very well accelerate our moving in a particular direction away from our old tradition. On the other hand with Dr. VanWylen this thing had just stopped, you couldn't move anywhere, there were no jobs available, and so there was a faculty that pretty well stayed put. I can remember during Calvin VanderWerf's administration we hired 17, 18 people in a year, but we don't have that at the present time. So you have to work with the people you have and you have to be very honest in showing what kind of administration you want.

I think one ought to give full credit to Dr. VanWylen that he has done that. He has been outspoken as to what he wanted, he hasn't tried to hide his philosophy of education, be it talking to students or the Board of Trustees, or talking to faculty. I think if you were to go through Hope's faculty now and ask do you know what kind of school this man wants, the faculty would say, "Yes, I know." One couldn't always ask that question and get an answer, but now you do have that.

He has been successful in the hiring he has done, finding people who were interested in a Christian college, one finds them all over, not necessarily all Reformed Church background but we never had that at Hope College, but he has been able to find these people. I think one has to give him credit for that because we have had deans and a chancellor, who gave us the notion they couldn't find people like that. He's been able to find them, they've always been available, they always have been around. It was whether you wanted to go ahead and find them and get them. But, he has been

able to bring to the school some very fine scholars and some very fine Christians who understand young people. On the other hand we've also found that there are some of the people whom we've had for some time who really didn't understand what this college was all about who have come to appreciate the tradition because they have heard it now enunciated and talked about it. They've come to appreciate the tradition and they have themselves become a part of it, and they are becoming very fine members of that tradition, we have that also. And I think that does happen. We had that happen before.

Dr. VanWynen has established himself very well, and right along with that, I think one of the reasons that he has been able to do a great deal of this is his openness and his credibility. He has also shown himself to be an excellent administrator, probably the foremost fund raiser that this college has ever had. He's been more successful at it than anyone I know, and he is well received. He has certainly the confidence of his Board of Trustees, and on top of that he has the confidence of the church, and the community. He is most acceptable for speaking engagements and people have trust in him. Trust is a very, very important thing, but people do trust him and this has meant a great deal in his ability to make some changes. He hasn't made these changes in such a way as to be unkind to people either, he has sought to work with those people he has and he hasn't been narrow about it either. There are some of us of course, like myself, who can not wait for things - would like right at the outset to see faster progress, but then that may have been wrong too, and I would admit that. I think that he has done an excellent job, that the college is well received.

CONRAD: Would you say that....

PONSTEIN: I would like to say one other thing, and that is something we forget, during these years one of the prime influences in maintaining this

as a Christian college has been the students, even when we had faculty many of whom didn't care, we always had a very fine group of students. A good nucleus of students who were interested in this being a Christian college, and who worked toward that, and whose activities right here on the college indicated what they wanted. The real religious aspect of the college for sometime was to be found in the hands of a number of these students. I think that I would have to say I deeply appreciated what a number of those students did. As I look back I think they meant a great deal to the maintaining of a Christian attitude at this college.

CONRAD: Have you seen any major changes in students, as great a change in student philosophies as you have in the faculty over the years?

PONSTEIN: No, I don't. If I were to; this is a difficult question, to do this and not to be too specific. If I were to generalize on it I think I would say that as I look back over the last ten years that we have had a large number of students who have been more outspoken and more willing to show this in their actions, and more willing to stand up for what they believe, than I think we've had at any time that I've been here. I think if I was going to put this on a graph I would have that line go up somewhat as I come to the last ten years. I think of students who set up their own little organizations within the college so they could meet together, work together, and so on. I must speak very well for them and I think very highly of what they've done.

CONRAD: In your years here you served in what started as the Department of Bible which evolved into the Department of Religion, how do you see that department having played a role in the development of Hope College?

PONSTEIN: One thing, the department when I first started had Dr. Voogd, Professor Hilmert, and myself, we had three people at that time and then slowly we grew into what I believe is seven.

CONRAD: Yes, seven.

PONSTEIN: I think the department has over the years become much more a part of the program of the college in the sense that we are on an equal footing with the other departments, because at one time the Religion Department was nothing more than a little service department. In one's freshman year one generally took a course, in the sophomore year one, in his junior year one, and then a senior seminar, it was nine hours all together but that was it. You could take a few other courses but one wasn't able to get a major in the Religion Department. Let me give you an example, a little side line to show you that we didn't always have all of this administration and everything else. I had thought that we ought to have a major in our department. One morning I was downtown in the Windmill Restaurant, what is the Windmill Restaurant now, it wasn't then. Dr. Lubbers was in there, he did that a lot of times, go downtown for breakfast, and so he sat down with me and we were talking, and I said, "You know what I'd like to get, I'd like to get a major in Religion, to put in some more courses and have a major." "Oh," he said, "that sounds good to me, why don't you go ahead and do it." So that's what we did, we set up the courses and simply put in a major, that's all. We didn't have to go through all kinds of committee structure at the time. He said we could do it, so all we had to do was to say to these people, "Dr. Lubbers would like to have us do this." So we did it and we started with putting in new courses. It was rather interesting, we didn't have anyone to teach some courses, so we taught them. I remember we had history, Church history. I said I would teach Church history. It meant I had to do a lot of work to get all this set up but, I did this and Church history became a very popular course over the years. I remember teaching 80 or 90 students in one section which I like better than teaching 10 or 15. This is what happened. Then we began to pick up majors in the

department. It gave the department some prestige because we were no longer just a service department.

I think over the years the department has also been influential because a lot of the young people who were interested in doing something in the area of religion talked to us about their plans. It has taken part in various aspects of religious life on campus. I might throw this in just on the side. It probably won't be in the right place but, there was a time when the Department of Religion, and at that time it was Dr. Voogd and myself, was in charge of chapel, which we had every day. We would in turn set up speakers for chapel, and if we couldn't get anyone, we would do it ourselves. I remember that I used to lead chapel very often, and this was when everybody went to chapel, but this was not a special office. We were simply assigned to this as a part of our work. For a time Dr. Voogd was the Chaplain of the college also, College Paster we used to call him at that time, because we didn't have a Chaplain until much later. But as far as chapel is concerned we would just do this as part of the work of the Religion Department. This was simply expected of us.

CONRAD: So when did the split between the Department of Religion and the Chaplain's Office occur?

PONSTEIN: I really don't know exactly when that was. Allen Cook was our first Chaplain but I can't tell you exactly when that was. I was going to say earlier part of the VanderWerf administration, but I think that is something I ought not say because I'm not accurate on that.

CONRAD: Then why was the change made?

PONSTEIN: Oh there had been some discussion that since the school was getting larger that we should have a full time chaplain and this is how this happened.

CONRAD: You also played a major part in aiding the teaching of religion in

public schools. Could you talk on that?

PONSTEIN: Yes, it was some five or six years ago. Actually it goes back much longer than that, one would almost have to go back a dozen, maybe 15 years ago, when a small group of us met in Grand Rapids to talk about this. When we first discussed this we had people from Calvin, a few of us from Hope, we had some people from Aquinas, and some Jewish people discussing the matter of having courses in religion in the public school. It was a very difficult assignment because at that time people were very much opposed to that and could see all sorts of difficulties. Then we met later on with larger groups of people. It was very slow going because there were a great many people who couldn't see any possibility of this at all. What actually happened was that slowly on schools on their own were putting in these courses. Then about five years ago I did a survey of schools in the state of Michigan and found out that ever since the Supreme Court had ruled that religion could be taught in the public schools more and more schools were putting in courses on religion. If one had made a graph one would have noticed that ever since the Supreme Court ruling it had been moving up. By the way there is a copy of the results in the Archives. That indicated that there was a real interest in this. Then a few states, for example the state of Florida, the legislature passed a resolution directing their Department of Education to begin setting up a program in the study of religion. That of course gave some impetus to the program. A few other states did the same thing. I had a chance to attend a summer seminar at Florida State University to see what other schools were doing. Also I was part of a committee organized in the state of Michigan, which is still operating and continues to deal with the whole question of religion in public schools. This is accepted and it keeps growing. Also more people are now getting interested in writing for this, putting out text books, and so on. One fall I spent some time just visiting schools that had

put in programs to find out how they were doing and how they were getting along. I found a very positive attitude on the part of teachers, teachers in fact enjoyed teaching religion. I found also that they very often had some of the better students which probably indicated interest, a family interest. This is a growing program. Then newspapers carried stories about some of this which gave us more advertising and helped this whole thing to grow so that now it is pretty well an accepted program around the country. There are people of course who still try to give some token opposition, and some schools have been doing so, but every year it tends to grow.

CONRAD: You were also on a committee to do something about this whole committee structure which we have here, what type of things did you find out?

PONSTEIN: Yes, I was on a committee to do something about this whole committee structure which we have here, and I was Chairman of that. I presume I became chairman because I made such a fuss about it. This was very interesting. Incidentally when the President came, President VanWynen, we had been working on this before he came, he was very interested in changing some of the committee structure. I rather think he still is, but I found it very difficult to make changes. People were very hesitant. The committee structure is set up in such a way that it gives the faculty a lot of power and like all power groups they didn't want to give it up, they wanted to hold on to their power and so there was a tremendous opposition to making any changes at all. When finally that report came out, even though I was chairman, I wrote a minority report seeking to point out that we ought to make changes to get rid of a number of these things. But when this got to the next committee they were not interested in it, they wanted to maintain the committee structure. And as you notice nothing has ever happened about it, it has pretty well remained the way it was. Once a faculty or any other group

gets power it wants to keep that, it wants to hold on to that, even though it is inefficient, even though it takes away from time that ought to go into teaching, people want to hold onto power. You always have a certain number of people who are committee oriented, who like committee work, to work on these things and therefore refuse to give up on them, and I think it would be difficult, to make changes. The only way this could possibly be changed would be if the administration were to simply change it and say, "We've changed it, that's all." You see you try to be democratic about this and, when you are, you don't get very far because the people who have that power want to hold on to it, they don't want to change. It can be a real difficulty.

CONRAD: What type of changes did you propose in the structure?

PONSTEIN: Well to get rid of the number of these committees. To give you an example, we have a Curriculum Board and a Curriculum Committee. One doesn't need two of them, first it goes to one of them, then to the next one. We should have one, that's plenty. One doesn't need all these sub-committees. Also one ought not to have committees for everything. If a problem arises, appoint an ad hoc committee, and as soon as it has done the job you get rid of the committee. Committees keep going and you never get rid of them. That's really the thing I wanted to get done. But we still have all of them.

CONRAD: Also in looking through some of the stuff on you and talking to students who have had you, I have come to see that you stress as a professor at an undergraduate college your main function is to teach, and not research and do extra committee work. Do you think that is a general view of professors here?

PONSTEIN: There are other people who feel this is true. I probably was interested in carrying it a lot further than most people. I felt that I

ought to be teaching, that's my job and I ought to do so, and not spend all my time running the college. We hire other people to run the college. Let them run it and I'll do my work in the classroom and with the student. And we do have some people who prefer to do this. But there are also a number of faculty people who love committee structure, who love serving on committees, love to spend their time doing these things. I don't know how to describe that, but there are people that way, and these people are not going to give up. And that makes the college very expensive. When people are spending their time running the college, they don't spend their time working at their job of teaching. When I taught I never turned away a student. I could always bring in more chairs, if a student wanted to move in. They used to always kid me when I said, "Tuition is a price, and you are a customer, and you can come in. I'm not going to say that you can't come into this class." The result is I've always had a number of big classes and I rather enjoyed them too. Big classes were never something I disliked. I enjoyed being with students in a class. It was fun, and I feel very sorry for a student who is trying to get a schedule and has to change the whole schedule because one professor can not have one more student, which I think is purely, if I may put it - bunk. If one can teach 21 one can teach 22. I could never figure why a class ought to be limited to 12, why not 13, you see none of that means anything.

I had done studies on this and made it a point to get all the information I could because there are a number of studies that have been done on class size, methods of teaching, and so on, and there are no studies to indicate that smaller classes are better. If the studies prove anything they prove that larger classes are a little bit better than smaller ones. There are no studies that prove that smaller classes are better, that is purely a myth. And it does not make a great deal of difference how you teach

either, whether you lecture, or whether you have lecture discussion. On the whole it all adds up the same way. There was a very interesting study done at Princeton and this was on the number of courses that Princeton offered. Incidentally they offered fewer courses than we did although they had more departments. They asked students about class size and students said they really didn't care as long as, let us say, it didn't get over 100. In other words it didn't make any difference to them. Throughout the years I've always made it a point that I would not see a student turned away wondering where he could go when he was paying good money to get an education. Whenever I see people doing that kind of thing it always makes me a bit upset that we should even allow that. What's more I don't think schedules ought to be set up by faculty people either. I think schedules ought to be set up by the computer center to see what is the best for all the students involved.

CONRAD: That's all the questions I have, do you have anything you would like to add?

PONSTEIN: No, I can't think of anything right now.

INTERVIEW II

CONRAD: Looking over the last interview one of the things I found that we never got to talk about was what went on here in the 60's. I've always heard a lot about what went on in the universities at that time with the student unrest and problems. I was wondering what were your reflections on that period here at Hope College, it being a small school and a Christian college. How did the students here react to the war and other things going on in that period?

PONSTEIN: Well, I suppose that I would have to say that for the most part the big majority of the students, although they had ideas about the war, and many of them had a good many questions about the war, the number of people who actually took part in what one might speak of as demonstrations was really very small. That may have been true in most places. But that group tended to be rather vocal. We did have some general meetings in the chapel and Winants. We had discussions on the Vietnam War. We did this with panels, or brought in someone to speak. There were people who sought to bring this to the attention of the college in general, through signs, the usual placards and so on, or the kind of thing we had at the time when the young people were shot at Kent State. People had petitions to send to the administration about what had happened at Kent State. We also had a visible demonstration in the center of the campus - east of Winants, a replica of a cemetery with a number of crosses. What is also interesting is that over one summer all interest evaporated. In other words during the three months the students were gone the whole atmosphere had changed. I talked to people who were on other campuses and that was pretty well their experience also. And now you would probably like to ask my why,

CONRAD: Yes I would.

PONSTEIN: I don't know, exactly. I think when finally we went from the draft, you see the draft was changed, this had a great deal to do with that; and here I'm giving my own idea of this. I think that had a great deal to do with the change. We didn't have as much protest as other schools had, and we had very little that one could speak of as vandalism or violence. Maybe it might be of interest to you that at the time when Martin Luther King was killed, students, the next morning, got together rather spontaneously and marched downtown in what one might call a protest, but it was also a memorial, and went to Centennial Park where they heard a few people speak on Martin Luther King and what he had meant to them.

CONRAD: Would you say that a lot of this type of reaction that you were talking about occurred because of its being a Christian college, would you say that maybe it cut down on some of the violence and the more out spoken protests?

PONSTEIN: Well I suppose that part of it is that a good many of the students here, although they were in opposition to the war were not the kind of students who would show that in violence or in vandalism. And here once again we're not the only school where there was that kind of reaction, there were even universities that had that kind of a reaction.

In answer to your question if this was related to its being a Christian college, I think there were times when we had discussions about this, about the whole matter of our Christian concerns in relationship to the war. That certainly did come out. People did discuss this. If one thinks of the background of our students they come from middle class homes and the lack of violence and vandalism reflects their home background. That's probably the reason.

CONRAD: President VanderWerf I would guess had a large part to play in organizing some of these panel discussions that you spoke of earlier, did

his administration do a lot to help the students to cope with these problems?

PONSTEIN: I don't recall that he necessarily did this. I'm thinking of the matter of the war. I think the Chaplain was interested in this, Chaplain Hillegonds, in carrying on discussions with students. There were people on the faculty who had an interest in this and helped students to do this, in fact very often whether they were demonstrations or protests, it was not unusual to find that the moving force behind some of these were faculty people. The moving force was composed of faculty and people who worked with students to get this moving.

CONRAD: In the late '60's I've read that there was some stir up about Calvin VanderWerf and on July 31, 1970 he resigned, I was wondering if you could give us some insight into what was going on around that time, at least from a faculty viewpoint?

PONSTEIN: Some of that I do know about, some of it I don't because for a semester I was gone. Right around the time that he resigned I was in California. But yes this was true, a number of faculty people were concerned about the kind of appointments that had been made which they felt turned us away from our goals of a Christian college. There wasn't much of an attempt to keep a faculty which was in sympathy with the aims and goals of the college, in fact we had a number of people who were diametrically opposed to those same goals of the college because they had no idea what they were. In addition these people were never given any insight as to what kind of a college we were and there had been no discussion with them about their own personal relationship to the Christian faith. I say this, I don't say this off the top of my head, it's a matter of having asked these people, and they were very honest and said, "No one ever told me this, No one ever discussed this with me," or some of them said, "Had I known this I wouldn't have come here." And there were people who were worried about this.

INTERVIEW II

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PONSTEIN: Well, I suppose that I would have to say that for the most part the big majority of the students, although they had ideas about the war, and many of them had a good many questions about the war, the number of people who actually took part in what one might speak of as demonstrations was really very small. That may have been true in most places. But that group tended to be rather vocal. We did have some general meetings in the chapel and Winants. We had discussions on the Vietnam War. We did this with panels, or brought in someone to speak. There were people who sought to bring this to the attention of the college in general, through signs, the usual placards and so on, or the kind of thing we had at the time when the young people were shot at Kent State. People had petitions to send to the administration about what had happened at Kent State. We also had a visible demonstration in the center of the campus - east of Winants, a replica of a cemetery with a number of crosses. What is also interesting is that over one summer all interest evaporated. In other words during the three months the students were gone the whole atmosphere had changed. I talked to people who were on other campuses and that was pretty well their experience also. And now you would probably like to ask my why,

CONRAD: Yes I would.

They were also worried about the rapid increase in the size of the faculty, and the tremendous emphasis on the sciences. And there were people from the faculty who even got together to discuss this. In fact I remember one group getting together at the home of one of the faculty people, I would guess there must have been about 15 people there, who discussed this, what could be done about it. There were also people who called some of these things to the attention of the Board of Trustees, there was a feeling of discontent. I think one would also have to say that the group that was afraid that we would lose our tradition and the college was not in the majority. In fact I would have to say it was a small minority and the reason I have to say that is because by that time people who knew the tradition, the goals, the purposes of the college, and wanted to maintain them, had already become a minority. We were at that point when at the faculty meetings if it were a matter of something one considered very vital and really a part of what Hope College had always stood for, if there was discussion on such a matter or a vote taken, we didn't have enough votes to maintain the old traditions, and we had the distinct feeling that we were in the minority.

CONRAD: How did this little minority work such changes, VanderWerf did resign and now we've got a President who stresses the Christian aspects?

PONSTEIN: Yes, when the time came to begin looking for the new President, it seems to me that it was one of the members of our own faculty who called to the attention of the Board the name of Dr. VanWynen. Then Dr. VanWynen of course was well known being Dean of the Engineering School at the University of Michigan, and he already had a very good reputation in educational circles. There were a good many people within the Reformed Church who knew him, and who recommended him. There were a great many people who made it a point to write, to call and to say, "Here is a man, let's have a good look

at him." Let me say this, that there was also a faculty committee asked about this. They were asked about their attitudes. It seems to me there were ten and only one or two got up and publically spoke for Dr. VanWylen. In case you would like to get further information and get that more accurate then I'm giving it to you here, you can get it directly from Dr. Bruins and Dr. TenHoor because both of them wre involved. But I don't want you to think that Dr. VanWylen had the support of people on the faculty, he didn't. They did not support him. But the Board of Trustees was very supportive and hired him, and as we see he's probably the best fund-raiser ve've ever had and he certainly has the support of the Board of Trustees.

CONRAD: What would you say was President VanderWerf's view of the college that let him do such things that the college had sunk during his administration?

PONSTEIN: I don't know, but I think that I have to say something I said before and that is that it would be wrong to say that all of this happened under Dr. VanderWerf. He had some very good ideas and did some good things and this matter of the college going in a different direction ought not to be laid simply at his feet. There had already been a movement in that direction previously. We had had an interim chancellor for example and we had deans who had very little notion about where the college ought to go, who had been very careless about whom they hired. Then one must remember that deans and departmental chairman had a great deal to say about who was to be hired. Let's suppose you have a department in which you have four or five people but none of them have any real sympathy for the notion of a Christian college or at best you only know it second or third hand, and they must recommend people for that department. They naturally are going to recommend people who are like them, they are not going to look for someone who is going to be sympathetic to a point of view they don't accept. But I don't want to say that this all began with Dr. VanderWerf. Perhaps it

moved more rapidly for awhile because the school was growing and we were also hiring many people and there was a greater opportunity for that to happen. But it was not simply VanderWerf, we have to remember that at that time this involved deans and even interim people. You see between the time that VanderWerf left and VanWylen came we had a chancellor also and these people tended to be careless.

CONRAD: But do you think VanderWerf gave the college some kind of direction, did he spell out what he saw as the purpose of Hope College, and I see that as a thing the President should be doing. Did President VanderWerf do something like that?

PONSTEIN: No, not that I recall. He didn't spell out what it was the college should be. There was no great interest in doing that either. In the case of Dr. VanWylen that's one of the first things he did after he came here. He tried to set a statement of goals and purposes as to what is a Christian college. I know because I was on the committee with Dr. Jentz and Dr. Marker. We had a great deal of difficulty selling that to the faculty. The fact of the matter is we had people who were very much opposed to spelling out the goals and purposes of the college in a Christian framework, people who made it a point to be in opposition to that. Those were not necessarily people who had come to the college without really knowing what it's all about. Some of these people had been here for sometime and some had a Christian background. They wanted this to be a much more open, broader sort of a school, people who really didn't care that much about having the college distinctly Christian. The committee used to hear from those people. After we had the document put together and submitted to the faculty, we had a meeting with a representative group from the faculty, and it was quite obvious that there was a great deal of opposition to it, a great deal. To get across a statement of goals and purposes which was

Christian was something they disliked very much and they were open in telling us about this. Incidentally in case you would like to pursue this further, you can go to the library, there are copies of all the comments, letters, and so on that came from the faculty and these have been placed in the library for anyone who would like to look at them later on.

CONRAD: Well this committee eventually came up with one, was it finally approved by the faculty, how did it get through?

PONSTEIN: No, in fact I'm not even sure that it was finally approved. I'm not sure exactly how to put this, we did have a vote on this and it seems to me that it finally was accepted. I don't think this was ever passed by the Board of Trustees. It seems that it finally wound up as the document to be used^{as} a guideline by the President. The document is not too long. It sought to point out how the Christian faith is to be integrated into all of life; to deal with God as Lord of all the universe. Under no circumstances did this give one the idea, that we were a Bible college or anything of that nature. In fact it indicated that within this framework one ought to be even more free.

CONRAD: We've talked about how the administration has grown and become more costly to run. I was wondering how you have seen the development of the fund raising process over the years?

PONSTEIN: I don't know whether I would be the best person to ask about this, I can say this, that there was a time, if you go back say to the time of Dr. Lubbers, when he did most of this himself. I would say the growth in this matter of fund raising began at the time of Dr. VanderWerf. He set up a Development Office. We then had at least three or four people in the Development Office. We had always had a small version of a Development Office. I would say that this developed for the most part the latter part of Dr. Lubbers' term and then grew during the time of VanderWerf's term of

office and certainly received some impetus in the last years.

It is rather interesting as one looks back to see the number of people who have been in and out of this office, people who have been with us, and in a few cases have gone on to other schools, universities, and so on. We had professional people, several professional people, who came in from companies who did this work, who were with us for some time. We have our own development office. It's been worked out in a very fine way and is doing a good job. But I think I have to say that my knowledge of that is somewhat sketchy. When one looks back to the time of Dr. Lubbers, it was a very small operation. Dr. Lubbers did a great deal of it himself.

CONRAD: I've heard about times that the faculty was called on to make speeches, or write letters to help with fund raising or to attract students to come here. Were you ever called on to do that type of work?

PONSTEIN: Oh, I have done this with churches and have gone off to many churches to speak on behalf of the college, which is of course related to fund raising. I've gone out on local campaigns. And other faculty, I'm sure, have done it more than I have. Of course some of us in the Religion Department did a great deal of this in churches. And not only people in the Religion Department. We used to go to churches as a matter of fund raising and building up relationships between the college and the church. People from the Religion Department and some of the people on the faculty who were very fine people in their Christian witness, many of whom were members of the Reformed Church and had served on the various consistories, people who were well accepted in the churches. Many of these people were well known in the churches, lay people as opposed to the ministers and the Religion Department.

CONRAD: You spoke of the relationship between the college and the Reformed Church, how have you viewed that relationship during your years at

Hope?

PONSTEIN: Well there was a time when that relationship was very strained. That was especially true even during the time that Dr. Lubbers was President. There were times when the relationship was there but it wasn't necessarily strong. Dr. Lubbers very often got into churches, but it was not a very strong relationship. And I suppose at the time we tried to strengthen this because some of us would go out to churches to speak. I would have to say that during the time that Dr. VanderWerf was President that deteriorated, somewhat, maybe even considerably. Not only that but since a great many people on the faculty had very little interest or relationship to the Reformed Church, they thought of the Reformed Church as a millstone more than anything else, they didn't care to have much to do with it. They also went on the assumption that since the Reformed Church didn't pay many of the bills, it didn't have much to do with the college anyway.

But on the other hand since Dr. VanWynen has been here the matter of trust, trust is really the big thing, has changed. In fact almost a complete change, a turn around, so that today there is a very good feeling between the college and the church. And the President is well received by the churches. I think he has done much of this himself because of the fact that people trust him, they accept his point of view. When they think of the college their attitude is, "There's a man who knows where he is going and we're perfectly willing to back him." So that in the years that I've been here I would say that the relationship between the college and the church is better now than anytime that I've known.

CONRAD: That is all the questions that I have, do you have anything you would like to add?

PONSTEIN: No, I can't think of anything right off.

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Quietly Retired but Not Forgotten

In October, Dr. Lambert Ponstein '48, professor of religion, gave his last oral exam to students enrolled in his seminar course, turned in the key to his office in Lubbers Hall, and went home. He had retired.

News of the event took many by surprise. It was, after all, mid-semester and the rest of the academic community had completed only a little over half of the term's work. Dr. Ponstein and his students, however, had compressed a three-hour course into the shorter time span by meeting six hours a week.

Even more surprising was the reminder that Dr. Ponstein is 65 years old. His shortness of stature and his flat-top (longer than ever before, but still undeniably a flat-top) both contribute to the illusion of fewer years. Seeing him pedal his way to and from campus on his balloon-tire Schwinn presents an interesting study in methodical sprightliness.

And then there are the arithmetical difficulties that arise from the fact that he was a member of the Class of 1948 and therefore graduated from Hope less than 30 years ago. Easily explained, especially by his students: for 17 years after graduation from high school, Bert Ponstein ran a fish market in Grand Haven, and he does not hesitate to talk about those days when he dealt in selling what he calls "those products of which the apostles and disciples were so proud."

It was after those fish market days and after World War II that he and his brother, Arthur '49, went back to school together. Bert majored in English and earned his degree in 2½ years.



Author Eileen Beyer '70 is editorial assistant in the Hope College Office of College Relations.

After teaching for a short time in a Newaygo, Mich. high school, he enrolled in Western Theological Seminary and also taught part-time in Hope's speech department. After receiving his B.Div. degree, he was ordained into the Reformed Church but never took a pastoral charge. Instead he began teaching religion and Bible at Hope. The year was 1952.

Whether or not those were better days is a matter of opinion, but Dr. Ponstein says that they were undisputably simpler days. When he began, Hope offered no major in religion. Dr. Ponstein describes the religion department at that time as "only a service department to the college." The department simply taught the required religion and Bible courses, three two-hour courses and one three-hour course which gave students exposure to one course a year. Dr. Ponstein recalls pointing out to President Irwin Lubbers one morning in a downtown coffee shop that he and his colleagues disliked those two-hour courses and then casually asking why they couldn't teach two three-hour courses instead. Dr. Lubbers told him to go ahead.

"So that's exactly what we did," Dr. Ponstein says. "And we didn't have to go through a dozen committees to do it either."

Soon after this change was made, the department was able to set up a majors program.

There was also the matter of registration. If all sections of a particular course were filled, professors who were working on the registration line simply opened up another section, then and there. It wasn't hard to find teachers willing to take on an extra class, and no one even thought of consulting the registrar.

"I myself never turned students away from a class," he says. "As long as we could get enough chairs in the room.

"I always dealt with students the same way I did with people in the fish business. They had paid just like a customer and ought to be treated that way."

It is an unusual analogy perhaps, and easily dismissed until one talks with some of Dr. Ponstein's students. They speak of his faith in them as students and his willingness to work with them to fulfill his expectations. There is a sense that if the "classroom customer" wasn't always right, at least he should be helped to become right.

For example, Dr. Ponstein started giving oral exams exclusively a few years ago after he discovered that often when a student couldn't answer a question it was because the question was poorly put. The oral format allows for questions to be reworded. It also enables the entire class

to review as a group all the material covered in a course, Dr. Ponstein says.

Although he misses being in the classroom with students ("That's what's fun. It keeps you from getting old 'up there.'"), Dr. Ponstein is finding retirement life "not bad at all." His biggest problem is that he is still waking up at 6:00 a.m. He still begins his day by reading the morning newspaper. Whereas before retirement he made use in the classroom of news items which illustrated theological points, he says he's keeping up the habit so he'll have something to start his first discussion of the day.

When Dr. Ponstein sent in his last teaching contract he felt he should give an accounting of his stewardship:

"I said: This is the way I have taught, this is the work that I have done, and in this way I give an account of my stewardship. And then the next question should be, how about the college's stewardship to me? And I then pointed out that the best way the college could fulfill that stewardship would be in maintaining Hope as a Christian college."

Students speak of Dr. Ponstein's habit of carrying the newspaper under his arm to class, his habit of "mmmmmm-hmmmmmm"-ing in obvious iambs, and also of his habit of speaking his mind.

"He's conservative in a lot of ways. I don't always agree with him," said one student. "But I respect him immensely because he always lets us know where he stands."

An indication of that respect is the fact that religion majors, unwilling to let Dr. Ponstein retire so quietly, organized a reception in his honor in late October. An indication of their affection could be heard that evening in rousing strains of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." ❄️



Resolution for Prof. Lambert Ponstein

November 5, 1976

In view of the recent retirement of Professor Lambert Ponstein from the Religion Department of Hope College in October, 1976, it is fitting to pause a few moments to recall his contribution to the life of Hope College and the Religion Department. Bert as he is best known to all of us came to the college officially upon graduation from Western Theological Seminary in 1952. During his seminary training he had already been teaching speech at the college. He came into the religion department at the time that Dr. M. Eugene Osterhaven was leaving the department and becoming a professor of theology at Western Theological Seminary.

During Bert's twenty-five year teaching career as a member of the Bible department as it was then called and now the religion department, he participated in many changes. It was customary in 1952 for every student to take a Bible course each year. Each course was two hours and the last course was called, the Philosophy of the Christian Faith, a three hour course. These requirements were changed to three religion courses, the last one being called the senior seminar. Each course was also three hours now. Moreover, in addition to this change, Bert gave leadership to the development of the religion major about 1960. Prior to this change, the religion department was primarily a service department to the school for the required religion courses. Now the department became a full-fledged one and offered a full major which has resulted in giving the department more stature in the school. Today's more than fifty religion majors are a tribute to that action to say nothing about the large number of majors who have gone through the department in previous years. Our major program has also forced the Reformed Church seminaries to be more aware of the quality of our religion department and what it has to offer.

Brother Bert has also made singular contributions to the life of the college as a whole. As a man of the world in the best Christian sense, Dr. Ponstein had no patience with academic trivia, an occupational hazard of college life. He did his share of board and committee work but insisted that the work center on important issues. He was a fighter for the right course of action as he saw it, taking the prophet Amos as a model more than Barnabas the son of encouragement. Through Bert's efforts, the TIAA retirement plan and tuition exemption for faculty children were adopted. Because Bert's approach to several college matters was along the lines of the ethical prophet rather than along the lines of Dale Carnegie, many people have misread him as a trouble maker. In his case he truly was a "troubler in Israel" as was the prophet Elijah a troubler in Israel. Most likely a future historian of this period in the college's history will say the Prof. Ponstein was the person most alert to the damaging changes taking place in the direction the college was taking in the later nineteen sixties. He as no other called the college to remain true to the original goals and purposes of the school.

Brother Bert has always been a respected colleague. Members of the department were not always willing to discuss the state of the nation at 8 o'clock in the morning when he returned fresh from his breakfast at Russ' restaurant having read the Detroit Free Press and Wall Street Journal but we have benefitted immeasurably from his probing questions and his searching spirit to get to the truth on a wide range of issues. Through his penetrating insights, along with his wide background of reading, he has been a most stimulating colleague. He has also given us an example of what it means to love this college to which he has given such a large segment of his life. He does not leave Hope a rich man because he began teaching when salaries

were incredibly low and he does not benefit greatly from the many benefits he gained for others. Since he made many pertinent comments on how he felt the college should be administered, he was penalized often in pecuniary matters because he was the prophet in our midst. He truly sacrificed for the cause he believed in.

WHEREAS Professor Lambert Ponstein has served Hope College, and the Religion Department, so well and so long, be it RESOLVED that we pay him due honor for his contribution to Hope College to the extent at least by having this resolution spread on the minutes of the Religion Department so that this written record may serve as a testimony to his life at Hope College for many years to come.

Elton J. Bruins, Secretary

This will be short and scattershot and personal. You are invited to make your own speeches when I am done. ~~Thankxxxxxxx~~ What I am, now, is a kind of pitch-man, here to loosen you up for the act which is to follow--that act being your own tributes to Bert Ponstein.

I dont know when I first met him. But when I first recognized his essential rightness was at a funeral. And at that time I said to myself, knowing that Bert would outlive me, having no discernable vices--that I would trust him to speak ~~the~~ my funeral sermon. I still believe that. Believe that he would speak well, grammatically, unsentimentally, and honestly. He is as good a sermon maker as I know. I still remember a chapel speech I went to,

I even, last spring, took my whole family to another church--14th St--to hear the man preach, and my daughter ~~still~~ frequently wishes to go back there and hear him.

I confess that I idolize him, and that isnt right. But he has been to me a friend and colleague and brother and, at times, father. And he has never asked any favors in return. Whoever is the patron saint of lost causes--and thus the patron saint of truth and economy and efficiency in academia--must smile kindly upon him.

PIC--ought to appoint him to nose into things.

Capable of righteous anger, but in him there is no spite.

A kind of Socrates--gadfly stinging the flanks of the machinery of the school, the town, the church. A popper of overinflated balloons.

One who can shout NO. What we need is a dozen Bert Ponsteins ~~xx~~ whose cry of NO, WAIT A MINUTE, HOLD ON THERE, would echo through the corridors as long as Van Raalte Hall stands

It is my fervent hope that there will be, in 20 or 50 years, still someone skulking down the halls of Lubbers or Van Raalte or Vander Werf or Van Wylen Hall, looking at a new course offering of a proposal to build an addition to the International Communication Center, muttering something like "Nah, we don't need that kind of thing." and "Whadda we want that stuff for."

Whoever it is probably won't know the origin of his phrases, won't recognize the ghost that walks ~~along~~ beside him smiling---

My hope too. That there will be in 20 or 50 years, still one who writes frequent unapologetic notes to president or provost wondering why we're committing this or that new and innovative program --and who will not be surprised to receive no answer.

These ones will not know the source of their questions, will not have known the original of the notes of which theirs are carbon copies. They will have learned at 3rd or 4th hand from the likes of us---

Those of us who honor you tonight, Bert, because ~~xxxxxxx~~ we will have learned from you, and remembered, that what is important is to look for the truth, the important truth, even if it means that the searcher gets ignored or demeaned in the process. To find, in short, ~~xxxxxxx~~ that the cause of Christian education is bigger and more important than oneself.

Proprietary, ext. copy unversed in such practices,
I follow the custom, originated I believe by another
desperate sinner, St. Augustine, of opening the
Bible at random in order to find truth. A custom
practiced by thousands of evangelists, snake-oil
salesmen, and one-night standers since, and a
custom that has frequently led me to an edifying
perusal of geneologies and dietary laws. But this
time, after a bit of fumbling--I knew the general
area I was after--I ~~found~~ laid my finger upon
the appropriate text.
It is found roughly in the middle of the ~~book~~
Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus. The speaker
is ~~Wisdom~~ that eternally elusive creature--aptly
personified as a female--Wisdom:

Come to me, you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruit.
The memory of me is sweeter than syrup,
the possession of me is sweeter than honey
dripping from the comb.
Whoever feeds on me will be hungry for more,
and whoever drinks from me will thirst for more.
To obey me is to be safe from disgrace;
those who work in wisdom will not go astray...
And the writer of the book makes his affirmation -
I will again make discipline shine like the dawn,
so that its light may be seen from afar.
I will again pour out doctrine like prophecy
and bequeath it to future generations.
Truly, my labor has not been for myself alone
but for all seekers of wisdom.

There are three sights which warm my heart
and are beautiful in the eyes of the Lord
and of men:

concord among brothers, friendship among
neighbors,
and a man and wife who are inseparable....

If you have not gathered wisdom in your youth,
how will you find it when you are old?
Sound judgment sits well on grey hairs
and wise advice comes well from older men.
Wisdom is fitting in the aged,
and ripe counsel in men of eminence.
Long experience is the old man's crown,
and his pride is the fear of the Lord.

I can think of nine men I count happy,
and I can tell you of a tenth:
a man who can take delight in his children,
and one who lives to see his enemy's downfall;
happy the husband of a sensible wife,
~~the farmer who does not plow with ox and ass~~
together
the man whose tongue never betrays him,
and the servant who has never worked for an
inferior!
Happy the man who has found a friend,
and the speaker who has an attentive audience!
How great is the man who finds wisdom!
But no greater than he who fears the Lord.
The fear of the Lord excells all other gifts;
to what can we compare the man who has it?

Remarks in Part -
Part 1
- by Dirk Jellenia at Bert Ponstein's
farewell dinner, Dec. 2, 1976

- It is gratifying to the committee that so many of you responded to our invitation. I'm sure that Bert is flattered and pleased.

I'm sure, too, that his pleasure will not be diminished when he learns that in order to assure a turnout we promised that entertainment would be provided by the Lawrence Welk Orchestra

But cheer up, Bert. Your friends said they were going to have a celebration too--sometime next spring they'll take you to Russes--for coffee, in your car.

--The committee is composed of three parts, too. Henry ten Hoor did, quite literally, all of the work of organizing this bash... including ~~making~~ the organization of the committee, which to my best recollection never met.

I wondered why he named Elton Bruins and me to it, and concluded that Bruins got his name on because (a) Henry couldn't find Sy Voogd; (b) Elton is next in line for Sy's job, and (c) Elton's natural piety and prayerful demeanor would assure either a good turnout or good weather. ~~May~~ I suppose I got on it only to lend a touch of class to the affair.

-- Lambert Ponstein
Breaks through the sunshine
When he speaks out loud
With an ominous Calvinistic cloud
2 questions ringing...why retire, why did he start
--Why did he retire? Last daughter graduated so he quit. Why did he retire in the middle of a semester? Ahh, nobody knows, except that he works a schedule all his own.

--Why did he start? A contented lad, living on oatmeal, cornmeal, fishmeal, in Grand Haven, following his youthful trajectory from coffee shop to Bram Bulthuis's glass works where there was a heater, to an occasional fishing trip. It was a serene and peaceful time, carefree and happy. And being Ponstein, Bert resented every minute of it.

--So when the war came along and offered him release, he snapped at the chance. And when the war was over he learned of the G.I. bill and of the limitless possibilities for freeloading which academia allowed. So he came to college, where for the first time he began reading newspapers instead of wrapping fish in them. And that was, of course, the end of innocence and the beginning of the labors from which we have suffered ever since.

He also went to ~~xxx~~ seminary and to graduate school. At least he says he did. It was in graduate school that he learned that miracle of apologetic, not to say apocalyptic, gymnastics which has characterized his teaching career--that he could prove the veracity of the Bible from the daily writings of Sidney Harris, and that he could teach Religion classes using only the Detroit Free Press and the Wall Street Journal as texts.

And so he came to us, still reading the Free Press under the impression that it was free--he's never yet paid for one.

And he taught speech. And Religion. And it was all the same to him. Salted Cod, they called his courses. No exams, few meetings, many thankful students. And at Hope he stayed for something like 24 years, more or less, give or take a few weeks here and there.

And now he is retiring. Take a close look at him, dear friends. This man is eligible for ~~honorary~~ elevation to the high status of professor emeritus. Think about it. *retire golf fishing*

But my stock of insults is limited

- proceed to part II, the serious part

(moments of 5 Presidents)

I Lubbock: ~~Bert~~ Perstein? Ah
yes indeed - a fruitless
labour in the vineyards - wor-
ked for next to nothing

II USW: Bert, ~~to~~ Bert who?
Never worked for me. But if he
did he was one of the first, most
sincere, and most capable erst
proté I ever knew - what was
that last name again?

Blank telegrams?

Speech teachers: Since again I
must respond via the media
of the memorandum - Yes, I
remember ~~being~~ Perstein is
a name I resonate with.