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## Johnson, Charles Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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The Hope College Oral History Project for 1996  
The Joint Archives of Holland

Interview #17  
Reverend Charles Johnson  
Holland's Past Fifty Years

Conducted by:  
Tracy Bednarick  
August 14, 1996

Abstract (subjects correspond to general order of appearance in transcript): move to Holland, childhood in Mississippi and Detroit, Holland Hitch, first impressions of Holland, All Nations Pentecostal Church, growth of minorities in Holland, rise in violence, involvement in changes in Holland, people come to Holland to work, Reformed Church, less influence of church on city, the Dutch and the slave trade, ways to stop discrimination in Holland, youth, pastoring, what it was like for the first blacks in Holland, the problem with liberalism, positives of Holland, changing role of women, the black cowboy postage stamp, burning of crosses in the yards of black citizens in 1935, "Harlem" at New Holland Street.

Interviewee: Reverend Charles Johnson (RCJ), Pastor of the All Nations Pentecostal Church  
Interviewer: Tracy L. Bednarick (TLB), Oral History Student Coordinator

TLB: The first thing that I want you to do is state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

RCJ: My name is Charles Johnson, born [date removed], 1938 in (city?), Mississippi.

TLB: When did you come to Holland for the first time?

RCJ: 1960.

TLB: What brought you to Holland?

RCJ: My parents.

TLB: Do you know why they decided to move to Holland?

RCJ: His (Reverend Johnson's father) cousin lived here, and he wanted to get out of Detroit, so we moved to Holland.

TLB: What was your childhood like? What did you do? Where did you go to school?

RCJ: In Mississippi? I went to a one room schoolhouse until I left Mississippi when I was twelve years old in 1950. Then we moved to Detroit, and went to Northwestern High School.

TLB: You moved in Holland when?

RCJ: I lived in Holland from '50 to '71, that is when I moved to Holland.

TLB: What did you do when you moved to Holland?

RCJ: I worked at Holland Hitch; it is a machine shop.

TLB: Do you want to tell me a little bit about your family? About your parents, if you have children, and your wife.

RCJ: My mother and father were married 63 years. My mother passed in 1990. My father in 90 years old. There were 10 children, and we are all still living: one in California, one in Kentucky, one in Florida, four in Detroit, and three in Holland.

TLB: What were some of your first impressions when you moved to Holland for the first time?

RCJ: That is was quiet and peaceful. That is what really attracted me. Clean.

TLB: How was it different from where you had lived before?

RCJ: I lived in Detroit which was at that time, I think, the fifth largest city in the country. Holland was very small.

TLB: Did it take some getting used to?

RCJ: Well, I liked it, because it was kind of like where I had been born. It was rural, and I was born in the country. I felt right at home.

TLB: What are some organizations that you have been involved in, in Holland? This could be work related or church related.

RCJ: A number of things. I am a member and officer of the Union. Also, I am the Pastor of the All Nations Pentecostal Church since 1987. I was Deacon before that, and a Sunday school teacher.

TLB: Where did you go to school to become a pastor?

RCJ: Great Lakes Seminary. It is in Grand Rapids. It is not a seminary, it is a (word?). It is not full fledged, we had to go through another organization.

TLB: What are some changes that you have seen in Holland since you moved here?

RCJ: I've have seen more minorities, more blacks, since I moved here. I've seen more

gang activities, and more violence. When I first moved here, you could go to the bank and you didn't have to have an id. They would cash your check, no problem. My brother came from California, and had a check from the Post Office, and they cashed it. Now you can't hardly cash it without id. That is one of the great differences. There are a lot of job opportunities. If you want to have a good life, you can have a good life. People who had a bad start in life can really apply themselves to do good if they want to. The opportunity is there.

TLB: Have you been involved with any changes, or how have you reacted to these changes?

RCJ: I belong to an organization where we negotiated. We talked with the Mayor, the City Council, trying to help the relationship between the races.

TLB: What do you think some of the causes of the changes that have happened Holland have been?

RCJ: A lot of people come here for work. They come up from South Haven, and Chicago. That is one of the reasons. There is opportunity to make a better life.

TLB: Obviously you are involved with the church. Is the church different in Holland, than it is in other cities, and how does the church influence the city of Holland?

RCJ: I am not so sure we have that much influence on the city of Holland, in our church; we are kind of outside the city limit.

TLB: What about the Reformed Church in Holland? Does it have an influence on the city?

RCJ: I think that it does. It is the biggest church in the city. It supports the city. I, for one, think that it should be praised, because of all the years, and all the work that it has done. I think that it has done a great job. I commend them. I think they set a

good example from before them, and I think they set a good example for the area for everyone else to come. There are some things that they need to work together to resolve as to the races and everything. They've had some difficulties with that.

TLB: Have you noticed a change in the influence of all the churches on the city, since you've been here? Between the communities' attitude towards church going or church in general?

RCJ: I don't think that has as much influence as it used to. It has taken people and given them more things to do. When I first came to Holland there was nothing you could do on Sunday, but go to church. You'd go to church, or you'd stay home. That was good.

TLB: And that has changed?

RCJ: Oh yes. People had to put a suit in to stop the city from closing the bowling lanes.

TLB: They had to put a suit in so they could stay open on Sunday?

RCJ: Yes.

TLB: What are some qualities that seem to stand out in the city of Holland?

RCJ: There are job opportunities. I believe that there is an attempt to reconcile with all races. Which was a problem, and I think this is good report for the races.

TLB: Are there any negative aspects to Holland, or any drawbacks to living in Holland?

RCJ: I like Holland. I don't have any problems with it. We have problems addressing the problems. But I like it. I'm sure that there are some negative things. People don't understand where others are coming from. They don't establish relationships the way they should. People need to take their problems, and make relationships. You need

to think about it as your family. That means you are involved with helping as much as you could.

TLB: What do you hear other people, friends from Holland, or people in the church say about the city, either positive or negative?

RCJ: Most people seem to think that it is good. Most people mention that they like it. Everybody is glad that it has improved, and the church.

TLB: What does industry do for the city of Holland? Has it changed at all since you moved here?

RCJ: There is more industry since I moved here. It makes the traffic worse. I'm not so sure whether it is good or bad--all the industry.

TLB: What about the growth in Holland? Holland is a fastly growing community. How is that affecting the city? And do you think it is good for the city?

RCJ: I think that it has become a problem. There is congestion of traffic. I don't think the roads were built for the traffic that they are carrying. I don't think the water, or the utilities are built to take the growth that we have. I think we have different problems, and growth is one of the reasons.

TLB: Is daily life different at all from when you moved here in 1971?

RCJ: It is for me, because I am a lot busier. I work outside the church work. I just don't hardly have time, because I am so busy.

TLB: What do you do, beside working for the church?

RCJ: I am a tool man. That is if I have a call to go somewhere, I have a problem getting there.

TLB: It is like having two full time jobs.

RCJ: Right.

TLB: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today and how does it interact with the other cultures present in the community?

RCJ: This is a tough one for me to answer, because the Dutch have been responsible for the slave trade. I think that they don't do as much as they could. I think that if they want to reap the benefit, they need to deal with the problems, and try to make things better.

TLB: What can the city do to help encourage relations between races?

RCJ: What can the city do?

TLB: Or is there anything the city, or community can do?

RCJ: What I had said to the city before was that they need to try to get to know the different races. That way they can understand how they respond. Sometimes people respond a certain way because of the race. Police stop a black, or Hispanic, and they respond a different way than they would if they stopped a white person. It makes them respond right back to that. We tell the young people to try to stay out of the system. There is a lot of abuse and all that. It is just best to stay out of the system, because if you get into the system chances are the police will write you up for anything. If the officer is a white man, the judge is a white man, the lawyers a white man, the bailiff is a white man, the jury is white, you are going to get in trouble. The reason is that people don't take the time to come to an understanding. They don't care why a person comes to this place, they just want to get away. That is a



cultural difference.

TLB: How do you feel about the youth of Holland's community, and do they have any special problems that are different than the adults in their community?

RCJ: You mean all races?

TLB: Yes, but if there are differences between the races too, I would like you to talk about that.

RCJ: A lot of the Asian youth who come over are used to seeing killings, and murders, and wars. They are used to violence. The strongest man is in control. That is why they respond the way they do.

TLB: Is it harder for them to understand how things work here?

RCJ: It is harder for them to adapt to what is here. They still use some of those things that they relate to from that perspective. That is why we need to be more tolerant. Not necessarily tolerance, but understanding. We need to try to work with resolving that problem, changing that constant. This is the same thing with the blacks and Hispanics in the inner city. They are used to the police coming down hard on them. In the big cities, the blacks lack opportunity for jobs. A lot of them. A lot of them are on welfare. A lot of them never saw their parents work. They don't have this mentality to get up and go out and work. Something needs to be done to deal with that problem, instead of what we see as the results of that problem.

TLB: To do something before the results happen?

RCJ: We need to deal with what causes people to do the things that they do. Instead of dealing with what they do, we need to deal with changing what makes them do that.

If we don't, we are just going to get more and more prisons, and jails. They are just going to keep coming.

TLB: What do you think of programs such as the Weed and Seed Program and the Community Policing?

RCJ: I think that it is good. I don't think that it has accomplished enough. What I think it does is it gets rid of the ones that don't want to do the right thing. I don't think it helps the people who do want to do the right thing, but they just don't know how to relate that. I had that problem as a child. I wanted to do a lot of things, but I didn't know how to do them. I was just trying to get into adolescence. After I moved out of the country, not really knowing anything, then I come into the big city, the lights and everything. I came from a school where I couldn't even talk to a white person, especially a woman or a girl, but in the city I was sitting right next to the girls in the desk. I couldn't think on what I was supposed to be focussing on, because I was so apprehensive. I didn't do well.

TLB: You were just trying to get used to the whole situation around you.

RCJ: I was not able to concentrate on work, so they put me in special ed. They said that I had a learning disability. I couldn't understand why I couldn't do it.

TLB: An important thing for teachers, and leaders would be to make sure they understand where the young people are coming from.

RCJ: They should have to live in the city for about two years, with no way out. You just have to cope. Then they would get an understanding, and would be able to factor it in as a consideration. They should try to deal with the children with compassion,

love, and concern instead of just being hard on them. It is not like they don't have to be able to do all the things, they do, but there is a better way to deal with it. It is easy to put a guy in prison, but it would be better if we could help him be a more obedient citizen. We could do that, but it takes more time, more compassion, more love.

TLB: You put somebody in prison the same way, but everybody needs a little bit different love.

RCJ: If they put as much effort as they do to house them in prison, as they could to find out what made them come there in the first place.

TLB: Can you tell me about one job you've had, or responsibility that you've really enjoyed?

RCJ: I've enjoyed pastoring. I like my work.

TLB: How did you come about being pastor of the church?

RCJ: I was a member there. The pastor who founded it was getting old. I think that he was in his nineties. As I look back, I realize that I was doing most of the work, most of the time. Then he began to get too old to do the job. He was very alert until his later years. When he got to the point where he was beginning to lose his mentally I was a deacon, and then an assistant pastor.

TLB: Is there anything that the churches can do to help improve relations between the citizens of Holland?

RCJ: Yes, the churches could come together in love with the confidence of a plan to interact with one another, not to just have a service or something. A lot of churches

say they want to work with us, but they don't ask me what we should do, they tell me what to do. That is not going to do it. I am saying that we need to sit down with the confidence of plan to interrelate with one another, get to know one another. That way they can get to know the children in the community. That is going to take a lot of effort.

TLB: What advice would you give a college student who has just come to the community, and wants to help in the community, to help make a difference, or not become someone who is going to be closed minded?

RCJ: I might have a problem saying that, because I never graduated from college, but just try not to think of yourself more highly than others. Just think of yourself as another person in the world, and everybody is trying to do the best they know how to do. Try to relate with them.

TLB: How does Hope College influence the city, and has it changed since you moved here?

RCJ: I don't really know; I am sure it has an influence on the city.

TLB: Have there ever been any controversies in Holland that you've been aware of, or that have influenced you life or in the church?

RCJ: Yes, there have been a lot of controversies. When the blacks first moved here. I'm not aware of everything, but they couldn't come downtown. They wouldn't hire them. Most of those guys got jobs in Grand Haven. At the leather place out on Ottawa Beach Road, they hired some.

One time the young people, police and that had a manhunt for girls, young girls. We thought that they had two-fours. We had some difficulty talking with

police like that. That was back in the '70s. Then we had one part of the government that was discriminating against us. They were going to come in here to investigate what was happening. (This is somewhat unclear.)

TLB: That was between the police and . . . ?

RCJ: Well, it was Hispanics and blacks. It was the Justice Department that they called in. They had a search party, and everything. I'm not sure of all the details.

TLB: Was there ever a job in Holland, or situation that you didn't enjoy?

RCJ: When I came to Holland black people had never experienced any job of importance or anything. We had a lot of difficulty because of that. That had these ideas of how I should be, and I wasn't like that. They were going to insist that I was going to be that way, and I was going to insist that I wasn't. As long as I stayed on that job, (unclear here)

TLB: Where did you move on to?

RCJ: To Macrosmatic Techtron. I have been there since then.

TLB: Can you tell me what you have heard other people say about Holland, such as family and friends from out of town that come and visit?

RCJ: They like it, but they don't want to move here. They like the big city. It is too small; there is nothing happening. In fact, I wish they had kept everything closed on Sunday. When you open up you become liberal. There are more liberal minded people. I think that is one of the problems. The Bible says, "The love of money is the root of all evils." Because they wanted to make money on Sunday, you get the rest of the problems that are going on.

TLB: We've talked about the negative things in Holland. What are some positive things about Holland, things that you enjoy about the city?

RCJ: I enjoy that I had opportunity to get this far in my life, and to better my life. I was able to establish credit here, where in Detroit it was difficult to do. There are opportunities to start anew, and fresh in your life. Everyone that walks in wants to have a better life. If they want to have a better life, and they work at it they can have it.

TLB: What are some things that we can do for the city of Holland to make it better than it is now, or at least keep it at the same level?

RCJ: I think that we have covered most of the things. Just be more caring and concerned about different people.

TLB: Concentrating on Holland, has the role of women changed at all since you moved here, and how has it changed?

RCJ: I think more women work. There are more women in the work place. They are working, and not home.

TLB: Are there any problems that women have to deal with that they didn't used to?

RCJ: Because of working? I think so. They've got to deal with learning how to get along in the work place. They experience discriminations as far as pay, and jobs. There is a negative part of it, their children may not get what they need.

TLB: Have you had any turning points in your life, and could you explain those?

RCJ: It was a big turning point when I moved from the South to Michigan. It was a big turning point when I moved from Detroit to Holland. It was a big turning point when

I left Holland Hitch for Macrosmatic. And when I became more active in the church, and then went into the ministry. Family, my family grew up, and all went to school.

TLB: Do you have children?

RCJ: Yes, I have four. One of my daughters is graduating from Central. (Sentence that follows is unclear.)

TLB: Do you have anything that you want to add about your personal history? What it was like when you went to school in Mississippi, or when you moved to Holland? Even what you are doing right now.

RCJ: In Mississippi, we had one school, one room, and one teacher. He taught all the grades, primary and then up. If you wanted to go beyond the eighth, then you went somewhere else. When you left there, the only way you had to go was you had to go on your own. There were no buses, or transportation. You had to find your own way to get to school. My brother, and my cousins went 30 or 40 miles away. He was the only one that graduated down there.

\*(A portion of the interview at this point was not recorded well enough to be transcribed.) I went home, and then I got married that same year. I am glad that I was able to raise my kids up here. They went to school up here.

TLB: What school did your children go to?

RCJ: They started at the school over by Homestead. We stayed there a year and a half--two years. Then we moved, and they went to West Ottawa.

TLB: Do you remember what brought your parents to Michigan?

RCJ: Jobs and opportunity. A change from the farm.

TLB: Did you have a lot of chores to do on the farm?

RCJ: Yes, as soon as you could walk you had to work. You had to milk the cows, get the wood, get the water.

TLB: I bet that was a big change then, to come from that to the city.

RCJ: It was. I had never hardly been to a city at all. One day we would go to town about once a year, maybe. But to come to big city. We moved in a truck. And just the drive to see all these hills, and mountains it was different. Yes, it was rough out there on the farm. You know, though, as you look back at the childhood it was better that we thought. We even had to make our own toys. We learned how to be industrious. Not like these kids now who just say, "Give me something."

My father, he was a good farmer. He always owned his own land. He taught us how to be property owners. We all own property, and none of us have ever been on welfare. We have always taken care of ourselves. We always had food to eat, and a place to stay, clothes on our back.

TLB: Is there anything that you want to add about the city of Holland? What it is like to live here?

RCJ: Well, I am just glad that it has changed. I am just glad that the people that came here, the first blacks. They had it really rough. The pastor of my church had cross burnings in front of his house. And now his daughter is in the Holland Paper talking about that. It was bad for the whole, but there were some families that were supportive of him. That was good.

TLB: Was you pastor one of the first black people to come to Holland?



RCJ: The first family was the Pearson family in 1942. This is as far as I could get back. The second was the (name?), who came in 1943. He brought his daughter and her husband, Emmett Brown. Then the Fischers came, and their daughter. (A statement about the Fischers is made here, but it is unclear. It could relate to the people that they brought with them.) His wife. And there was the black cowboy. (The previous sentence is what Reverend Johnson may have said.) There was Christian Marshall in 1944. Mr. and Mrs. Smith came in 1945. Then (name?) came in the 50s. The (name?) came in the 50s. Robyn Wells came in 1946. Tommy Jay. Bo-Bee Howard, who was the Fischers' nephew, was the first black man to. . .

TLB: Do you visit your relatives often, that live out of town?

RCJ: Not often enough. My father will turn ninety this year.

TLB: How many children did your parents bring to Holland?

RCJ: Not any.

TLB: Did they bring all ten of them to Detroit?

RCJ: All of them, and they all lived in one house. All of us. When they came to Holland, they brought three grandchildren, four or five year olds. Two of them were twins, and there a girl that was about seven or eight. They wanted those twins, their mom was in a coma from an accident. (The tape is fuzzy here and I am not able to transcribe it.)

TLB: Do you know if Mr. and Mrs. Smith are still living in the Holland area?

RCJ: No, they passed.

TLB: I wonder if they have any children.

RCJ: Well, I can't think of the Smiths. R. Hunt's wife, I don't have her name down, but her grandfather was a cowboy. There was a lot of controversy, because somebody said that they didn't go to his people, instead they went to his cousins to get the picture. They said it was his brother's picture, but they made a stamp out of it and said it was him.

TLB: A postage stamp?

RCJ: Yes, they had to redo the whole thing.

TLB: I bet that stamp is worth a lot of money.

RCJ: It is; they only let a few of them out. Some people snatched them right up. The family didn't even get any. They were supposed to get some first, but they didn't.

TLB: It is just like baseball cards, when they mess up on a stamp.

RCJ: Bo Bee Howard, and Bevy....they are all related. Freddy Stouemire.

TLB: Is that the article?

[Tape is turned over]

RCJ: My father lives at United (name?). We got a picture of me and her father in front of the church that was in the paper. I forget what year.

TLB: She is the daughter of the pastor?

RCJ: Right.

TLB: Was that the only place they could get jobs, was in Grand Haven?

RCJ: Yes. It was hard, but they endured and they stayed with it. They went off and worked. They had to pay the bills.

TLB: Your sheet with the names of the families says that in 1935, the first white family

burned a cross in front of their house.

RCJ: Yes, this newspaper article says that also.

TLB: It says the Browsers, but I don't know if that is the name of the family, or the people that burned it.

RCJ: The family was the Brown. They lived down from their house. But I don't know, all that stuff was before my time.

TLB: How long did it take you, when you moved to Holland, to find some people to associate with?

RCJ: I was out there in the community with the Browns, and the Stouemires, and the Marshalls. Howling Wells is my cousin. In fact, my father brought his cousin. His sister had an aunt that my father knew. I know Howling's grandpa. We all lived in the same area. They called it "Harlem."

TLB: Where was that?

RCJ: Out there, just past New Holland Street. They called it "Harlem."

TLB: I didn't realize how late it was before black people started coming to Holland.

RCJ: Some cities, like this which were founded by the Dutch, they didn't bring their slaves over with them. I was in Oklahoma three years ago, and I sat at a table with some other people. There were a black couple there, and they said they were from Holland. And I said I was from Holland too. But they were from the Netherlands.  
[laughter]

TLB: I have one more question. When you first came here, did you go to the church you are at now, or did you start somewhere else?

RCJ: I went to other churches. I had always been Baptist before. I went the Baptist church on 32nd Street. I think it is Calvary Baptist. And also another one.

TLB: Thank you very much.

RCJ: I'm just here to live my life, and I am happy to come here to a place like this where I can live my life. If I want to do good, I can. That is the way I like it. If anybody wants to come here, if they want to do good they can. That is a great place, as far as I'm concerned.

TLB: I've really found that there really does seem to be a desire here to make things work.

RCJ: Yes, we do have a good start.

TLB: And of course the problems are not just in Holland; it is the world.

RCJ: It is life. Life is tough. It is not a piece of cake. You've got to live it, and it is tough.

[end of interview discussion]