Norden, Russ Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ena Brooks
EB: Why don’t we start with stating your full name and the date and place you were born.

RN: My full name is Russell Lee Norden, and I was born [date removed], 1926, in Grand Rapids.

EB: Who were your parents?

RN: My parents were William and Cora Norden.

EB: What was your mother’s maiden name?

RN: Cornelia De Young. She was born in Grand Rapids; my father was born in South Haven.

EB: Your spouse’s name?

RN: Eleanore Norden.

EB: What was her maiden name?

RN: Short. Eleanore Short.

EB: Was she from Grand Rapids also?

RN: No, she’s from Auburn, New York. We met at Hope College, and the rest is history.

EB: One of the Hope College statistics. (laughs) Do you have any children?

RN: Yes, we have five children.

EB: Why don’t you state their names and the dates and places that they were born.

RN: We have one son, Steve, Stephen Mark, and he was born in Holland,[date removed], 1952. Then we have four daughters, and they were all born in Japan. Becky,
Rebecca Jean, was born in 1954. Our second daughter Martha, Martha Elizabeth, was born in 1956. Our third daughter, Sarah, was born in 1959. Our youngest daughter, Mary Christine, was born 1965.

EB: Are any of your children married?
RN: Four of them are married, yes.

EB: Do they live here in Holland still?
RN: Well, our oldest daughter lives in Holland. Our son, Steve, is a Reformed Church pastor, and he has a church in the northwest suburb of Columbus, Ohio. He has been there since 1984. Mary and Martha live in Grand Rapids, and our daughter, Sarah, and her husband and children live in Knoxville, Tennessee.

EB: Describe your first impressions of Holland.
RN: My first impressions of Holland were mainly related to the Hope College campus at that time...this was the fall of nineteen forty six. I came early to college, near the last two weeks in August, I think it probably was, for football practice. So, at that time, they had, where the present student DeWitt Center is now, there was an old wooden building that was built soon after the war. It was called the T Dorm, in the shape of a 'T,' and then there were several other dormitories which were kind of temporarily built soon after the war too. I lived in the T Dorm for two years.

EB: Wow, I never heard about that before.
RN: No? Well...

EB: That's interesting...
RN: You look it up in the archives, and you'll see pictures of it.
EB: Why don't you tell me about your schooling from Hope College on.

RN: Before I went in the Navy during World War II, in February of 1944, I went to Calvin College for one semester after I graduated from high school, and then I was going to be eighteen, so I wanted to enlist in the Navy rather than to be drafted into the Army. So, I had a few hours of credit from Calvin College when I came to Hope in the fall of 1946. I graduated in 1949, so I was only at Hope for three years, but the summer of 1948 and the summer of 1949, I went to Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, and took courses at that time, which, if I had stayed here at Hope for summer school, then I...they weren't offering any courses which I had not had during the regular school year, so at Wheaton, I was able to get courses that were toward my major, which was English Literature. So I was able to graduate then, in three years, with credits from Calvin and from Wheaton and Hope. Throwing them all together, I managed to graduate then in '49. I went through the formalities at the graduation here at Hope, in June at that time, but I didn't officially get my graduation diploma until after I had finished at Wheaton. I had those extra hours of credit which gave me all that I needed.

EB: Then from the Hope graduation?

RN: After graduation from Hope then I went across the street, at that time, because Twelfth street was still there going through the campus. I went across the street to Western Theological Seminary, and started in September, 1949, and graduated in 1952. So, just three years.

EB: What made you decide to attend the seminary?
RN: I had kind of had that in the back of my mind all the time that I was at Hope, and so by that time had already pretty much decided that I wanted to go into mission work. My wife and I were married in August of 1951, so we had just one year of school together, or that I was at school and she was teaching at Waukazoo Elementary School. By the time that I had graduated from seminary, we had met with the mission board personnel, and we said that our first choice would be Japan, to serve in Japan. Fortunately we were given our first choice. We should have gone to Japan the summer after I graduated from seminary, but my wife was expecting our first child at that time, and everyone went by ship at that time. There were no airplanes going really to amount to anything. So, everybody went by ship, and the shipping companies would not allow a pregnant woman to travel on the ship. So, our son was born in [date removed] 1952, and then we were sent to Yale University for Japanese language study. We had one year of that at Yale and then went to Japan in the summer of 1953, and then had one more year of language study after we were in Japan.

EB: Did you take that language study at a college in Japan or a university?

RN: Not a college, no. At that time, it was at the YMCA in Yokohama, where they had a language program, and it wasn't actually a part of the YMCA, but the language program used the facilities there at the YMCA.

EB: Now, somewhere in there, you met your wife and got married, in your schooling. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

RN: We met before I graduated in '49, so I suppose we first started dating sometime in
1948 and then '49. Then she graduated in '51, and we were married that summer after she graduated. But, yes. As far as how we met and so on, I guess you just keep your eyes peeled for a nice looking girl, and she was in various dormitories at that time. Her class was the first one to be in Durfee Hall, but she had been in Voorhees and a couple of other places too during her years at Hope.

EB: Were you married in New York or were you married at the Dimnent Chapel?

RN: We were married in New York at her church, First Presbyterian Church in Auburn, New York.

EB: Why don’t you talk about your mission work in Japan.

RN: After our second year of language study--our first one was, as I mentioned before, at Yale, and then the second in Yokohama--we were assigned down to the southern island in Japan, which is called Kyushu. We first lived in the city of Fukuoka, which is the largest city on the island, for about one year. Then a house was built for us in the city of Kurume, which was at that time about an hour train ride from Fukuoka to Kurume. We lived there for nine years, so we were in Kyushu for ten years. My work at that time was primarily...There were six Japanese churches in that area, and one of them did not have a pastor, and I helped out mainly with the English Bible Studies for high school students in the various churches. Then, the one church which did not have a pastor, they asked me to become the pastor of that church. So I did that for about eight years of the ten that we were in Japan, before we returned to Yokohama. So, I was the pastor of a small church. It was very small, in a rural area, and there were four members when I first went there. After about eight years
of working there, I managed to baptize fourteen people. It was very, very slow work, and not an awful lot of response, which is true all throughout Japan in the churches. Then in 1965, after we returned from our furlough in Holland...The first furlough that we had in 1958, I went to Princeton Seminary for study at that time. At that time, your first furlough was kind of a study furlough, and I chose to go to Princeton, and studied there for one year--various courses. Then when we went on our second furlough, it was in 1964, we lived in Holland at that time. I was assigned to help out at First Reformed Church and did various calling on people in hospitals or in nursing homes, and also started a Sunday School class for young couples. So every furlough that we came back on after 1964, we always went to First Reformed Church. When we finally retired in 1991, we became members of First Reformed Church. But, after we went back in 1965--we were home on furlough in 1964--we moved back to Yokohama. I had received an invitation to teach at Ferris School for Girls. It was the first school for girls in Japan. It was founded by a Reformed Church woman missionary in 1870, and it was called Ferris because the two men who were very instrumental in getting money to build the building and so on and start the school, they were both named Ferris, a father and a son. That's why the woman who founded the school decided to name it Ferris Girl's School. So, I started at the Ferris Women's College, it was called at that time, in 1965, and my wife also, started teaching at the high school, just part-time because we had children at home at that time yet and she didn't want to be gone while they were at home. So when they would get home from school, then she would be there. But, she did part-time
teaching for a number of years then, full-time teaching after our youngest child, Mary, left Japan to come to Hope College. So, we were at Ferris from 1965 until 1991. So, almost twenty six years at Ferris.

EB: Now, your mission work in Japan... Was this with the Americans that lived in Japan, or were these Japanese?

RN: No, it was Japanese. At that time, the Reformed Church had quite a few missionaries in Japan, many more than they have now. But, most of the ones who were there when we were working and came some years after we started, have all retired now. We retired in May of 1991.

EB: Why don’t you tell me how Hope College and Holland changed from when you first came to college until your first work?

RN: When I first came to Hope... my home was in Grand Rapids, and on Friday afternoon after my last class, I would get out on the corner of, usually the corner of College and Eighth street and hitchhike, and always was able to get a ride. Someone would pick you up, and you tell them where you’re going. Most of the cars at that time would go to Grand Rapids, so I always hitchhiked back and forth because I didn’t have a car of my own, nor did my parents have a car. So how has Hope changed? Well, Hope was very small at the time I was here, although the freshman class of 1946, that was a great many of the male students had been in military service in the second World War, so there were a lot of students, quite a number. There were over, I think, right around 600 students in the freshman class of 1946. Of course the campus buildings at that time were quite different than now. Graves Hall was the
Next to the chapel in what now is open space between the end of the Chapel and Nykerk Music Hall, was Van Raalte Hall, which was the main classroom building. That burned down while we were in Japan, it’s no longer in existence. I think it was sometime in the ‘80s that it burned down. We had to attend Chapel; required every morning, five days a week, and had student monitors who would take attendance every day, you sat in the same place, so that your monitor, if he saw an empty seat would know, Russ Norden...skipping chapel. Holland, the city was a nice place to live at that time. When I was a student at Western Seminary, we lived just across the street on Thirteenth Street, in a house that we rented. All those houses...we were happy to be home on furlough...it was after we had retired when they tore those houses down. Now they have the new seminary student apartments, which are beautiful compared to what we used to live in. We saw the house that we lived in one day, and the next day, it was flat. I think Holland has definitely changed, at least the core city area. Years ago, it was a good place to live, but now a number of people have told me that they have moved to some other place in town because the core city is not the best place to live now. So, that’s one big way I think that Holland has changed.

EB: What about the ethnic diversity? Was there ethnic diversity while you were here during school?

RN: Not so much. Well, in the college there were one or two Afro-American students, and other than that, not many from other places, at least that I was aware of. In ’46, there were very few, what would we say, foreign students, Asian Americans or
EB: How do you think the increase in ethnic diversity has changed Holland?

RN: I think mainly, where people used to live, anybody, at that time, in the core city area. Now I think a lot of those people have moved away and other ethnic groups have moved into those areas.

EB: Obviously, you are very involved in the church. How was the church involved in the city of Holland while you were attending, and what is its role in Holland now?

RN: When I was a student, when I stayed here Sundays after I started dating my wife and so on, then I attempted to stay in Holland over the weekends, of course, all the time rather than go back to Grand Rapids. Often, I went to the old First Reformed Church, at that time on the corner of Central and Ninth Street. Now, that’s gone, but I often went to church there and sometimes to Third Reformed Church. Probably the First Reformed Church was probably the most related to me, at least worship-wise, and so I often went to First Church at that time.

EB: Do you think the church plays a big role in how the city of Holland works?

RN: I think so. Yes, I definitely do. And, First Church, of course, has moved out of the core city area all the way up on Twenty-sixth and State Street. We moved up there, I think it was in 1962 or 1963. But, other churches too, I think, have a good influence in the city. Fortunately, now the Hispanic churches have their own church at what used to be the old Sixth Reformed Church, on the corner of Twelfth and Lincoln. So, the Hispanic group now has their own sanctuary for their worship. For a long time they worshipped at Western Seminary in the chapel, but of course, they wanted
to have a place of their own, if possible. So, when Sixth Reformed Church closed its
doors and the congregation of Sixth Reformed merged with Calvary Reformed out in
the eastern part of town, then fortunately the Hispanic Church, Crossroad Chapel it’s
called, was able to get Sixth Reformed for their own church. They’ve just started
meeting there, really quite recently.

EB: What role do you think Hope College plays in the community?

RN: Well, generally I think the community is very much in favor of Hope. Businesses, of
course, the students add dollars to businesses here, so basically, I think the people in
the city are very happy to have Hope College be a part of the city, especially in the
center, close to the downtown area. Yes, I would say that they are very satisfied with
Hope.

EB: Now, the tough question. What is your heritage background, family background?
Are you Dutch?

RN: Yes. My grandparents, both my father’s parents and my mother’s parents came from
the Netherlands, so I guess I’m Dutch.

EB: Is your wife Dutch also?

RN: No, her roots are really in England. Her grandparents had come from England, so
she’s not Dutch.

EB: So you’re completely one-hundred percent Dutch.

RN: I guess...Although, the name...whether it was originally spelled with two 'O’s in
Noorden, or the way it’s spelled now, 'Norden,' is more a German spelling. If you
look at a map of that part of Europe, the Netherlands and Germany and so on, just
across the border of the Netherlands, up north is a town in Germany, 'Norden.' So, I'm tempted to think that maybe my ancestry is German, but my grandparents all came from the Netherlands.

EB: Well, we'll say you're Dutch then. Since you've been in Hope College until now, how has the role of women, in the church, in work, and in the school and home, changed?

RN: Within the Reformed Church?

EB: Primarily, but...

RN: That's what I know most about, of course, but... Well, fortunately, most of the churches, and there are some that are still against it, but most of the churches go along with the thinking of women serving on the, what they call the consistory, in the church. My wife was an elder, and there are several women on the consistory now of First Reformed Church, and we also have a woman pastor. Our preaching pastor, if I can call him that, is a man; but we also have a woman pastor. I think a lot of the churches, especially out east, but also in the Holland and Grand Rapids area, are in favor of women in the seminary now, studying in the seminary and becoming pastors. So I think in that respect, the church has changed a hundred and eighty degrees.

Years ago, when I was a student in seminary, there were no women students at all. I think it's great that there are quite a number of women students now at Western Seminary and other seminaries, but I know most about Western Seminary. Compared to many years ago, forty, fifty years ago, when churches would never have thought of women being in ministry, or even consistory members. But, now, fortunately, most
churches in the Holland area agree with that.

EB: What are the pastor's names at First Reformed Church?

RN: At First Reformed Church, the administrative pastor is Daniel Gillett, and the woman pastor is Elizabeth DeJonge. We also have a youth minister, Dan Doepler. We have three on the staff really, two pastors and Dan, who is not a seminary graduate.

EB: On a different note on the role of women, how have you seen it change from when you were growing up to now?

RN: You mean in the church?

EB: No, in another aspect, such as in the home, or...

RN: At that time, of course, my mother never would have thought to work. She was mother at home all the time. My dad worked as a custodian at the school, Lee School in southwest, now it's Wyoming, but at that time, it was southwest Grand Rapids, and he was there a couple of years before I started kindergarten. In that school, you could go through from kindergarten through high school, in the same school building. When we first went to Japan in 1953, we were there five weeks, and my mother sent a cable. No one ever thought of calling at that time because international telephones just weren't really in existence at all, so everyone communicated by cable. She said, when the cable came, that my father had had a stroke and was in the hospital. Three days later we got another one saying that he had died, so this is just five weeks after we first arrived in Japan. So, all of my aunts, my grandmother, who was living at that time when I was growing up, none of them ever worked. Women just didn't work at that time. Although, when I was in
high school, an aunt of mine, who lived with us--she was single at that time--she had a job in a factory, but in the office. She was a secretary in the office at this factory. But, now of course, things are very different. Most couples, young couples at least, maybe have a child or two too, husband and wife both working, and you're probably aware of that whether your own parents have done that or not, I don't know, but that's the way it is now. But, when I was growing up, you never would of thought of it at all.

EB: While you were at college, did you have any jobs here in Holland?

RN: At that time, we had what was called the Blue Key Bookstore. It was in the basement of this Van Raalte Hall which I mentioned, and that was the bookstore. I helped out in that for a year or two. It was just volunteer stuff, didn't get paid at all from that. In the summertime, the first year or two I was at Hope, I had a job in Grand Rapids, in a factory actually, and when I was discharged from the Navy in 1946, just the summer before I came to Hope in the fall, I had a job, at that time, it was known as the Kelvinator refrigerator company, and I worked on the line where the refrigerators would come and the guys farther up the line would put the crate over the refrigerator, and then I, on one side of the line, hammered nails into the bottom of the crate to hold it together. That was my job for the summer! Just other things too in other summers that I did while I was a student.

EB: Did you have a favorite job of those?

RN: Well, not really, no. Most of them were kind of work that...

EB: Work to get money.
RN: Just to get some money for college, yes. Although, I should say, not college for tuition or anything like that because having been in the Navy during WWII, the government really paid all of tuition. At that time the seminary didn’t charge tuition at all, so all of my education, four years at—well, not four years, but three years at Hope, and the summers at Wheaton—was all paid for by the government. What a deal!

EB: What drew you to Wheaton college to take those classes in the summer?

RN: A missionary from my home church in Grand Rapids, or Wyoming now, he and his wife were missionaries in India. When I was a sophomore—I really didn’t have a junior year at Hope because I was only there for three years—but when I was a sophomore, this man and his wife came home from India on furlough, and he spoke at then what was known as the YMCA and the YWCA student organizations. He knew that I was thinking about missions, I hadn’t made up my mind at all yet at that time. So he took me out for dinner here in Holland before the meeting, and he said if you are at all serious, get through school as soon as you can. You’ll be able to get out in the mission field wherever you’ll end up going. That really got me going to get through as fast as I could. So I went to Wheaton college the summer of ’48 and the summer of ’49. Between those two summers, the credits I got and the three years at Hope and one semester at Calvin, I was able to get through then in ’49 from Hope. This missionary from my home church, he was really the one that turned me on to get going and get out of school. So if I had gone four years to Hope College and graduated in ’50, and then to the seminary and graduated in ’53, well I…fortunately I
graduated one year early from seminary, '52, as I wouldn't have if I had gone four years to Hope. That man, Dr. John Piet, taught at Western Seminary for quite a few years in missions. I had already graduated from the seminary by the time he had came, I forget what year it was, but he had been there for quite a few years after he retired from his work in India.

EB: What made you choose Wheaton College over a college closer to home?

RN: I don't really remember why it was Wheaton, as over let's say Calvin or something like that. I guess probably I thought I'd like to try another college once, and I had heard so much about Wheaton over the years, and so I thought, well, I'll give it a try. I applied for admission in 1948 and was there for eight weeks of classes and went back again in '49 to the same place. But I guess, to say that this was the main reason for choosing Wheaton, I at this point, I don't really remember. But I guess because, well, if I had gone to a place like Calvin, I could have lived at home, and that wasn't nearly as interesting as going someplace else.

EB: We kind of skipped over your childhood. Your parents both being of Dutch descent, did they speak Dutch in the home?

RN: No, actually, my grandparents spoke Dutch more than my own parents, but whenever my grandfather and grandmother, both of them would come over to the house, and whenever they didn't want my brother and I to know what they were talking about, they'd go into Dutch. My own parents could understand and sort of communicate in Dutch too, but the only time they ever spoke it was when we weren't supposed to know what it was that they were talking about.
EB: Did you pick up any of that?

RN: No, not really. I studied German for two years here at Hope, as I was a student, so at that time I knew more German than Dutch. Now, my Dutch pronunciation is more German, I'm sure, than anything close to being true Dutch.

EB: Why don't you tell me about growing up in Grand Rapids, and what your life was like, and where you attended school up until high school.

RN: In the southwest end of, at that time Grand Rapids, and now it has changed to the city of Wyoming, but we lived about a good mile from the church which we attended, Eighth Reformed Church. My folks didn't have a car, so we always walked back and forth, morning and evening. So, that was just part of growing up from the time when I was a little kid until I finally left for the Navy and then for college after that. As far as other elements of growing up there, one thing that, at that time, without a car, going downtown in Grand Rapids, we always rode the buses or the streetcars. They had streetcars at that time, which went right near our house, and we would just hop on the streetcar and go all the way downtown. Or later on, after the streetcars were gone, then they had buses. I had braces on my teeth for nine years. I started when I was nine years old, and had them taken off just before I...(end of side one) So, I always went downtown by bus or streetcar when they still had streetcars. At that time, it was the tallest building in Grand Rapids, the city bank building. It's got a dome on the top, and my dentist's office was on the fifteenth floor, so I thought I was really up high at that time. Of course, now they've got taller buildings. I went usually at least once a month, starting from when I was nine years old. At that time,
we didn't have to worry about getting on the wrong side of the tracks or anything like that. It was very easy to just go around without having to worry about any difficulties or things like that.

EB: Where did you attend school while you lived in Grand Rapids?

RN: Lee Street School it was called. Lee School and then Lee High School. I started out in kindergarten in that building, as I mentioned before. My father was the janitor or the custodian, and then I went to that same school all the way through high school.

EB: How have daily activities or even daily fears changed from when you were growing up to now?

RN: At that time there was no fear of getting in difficulties, just never worried about it at all. This is one thing too about having our children grown up in Japan. They all graduated from high schools in Japan. Then our son, who is the oldest, when he graduated from high school, he came to Hope. Except for our first furlough when we were in Princeton, we always came to Holland after that. They had mission houses where missionaries could live during the year of their furlough. So, our kids became very well acquainted with Holland and Hope College. And so, each of our five children graduated from Hope. And the four that are married, their spouses also are Hope graduates.

EB: Well now, that's amazing!

RN: Yes. So, we have kind of a long association with Hope, and we love it.

EB: I'd say so. Now, do you have any grandkids that...

RN: We have ten grandchildren, but the oldest is fifteen. He'll be sixteen next year, I just
wrote that in my 1998 date book today. I write all the birthdays in it, but the oldest is fifteen and the youngest is four of our grandchildren.

EB: Wouldn't that be amazing if quite a few of those went to Hope too?

RN: Yes, I hope that they will.

EB: Holland has been recognized as one of the top ten All-American cities, I guess. Why do you think they have that recognition?

RN: You should ask Mayor McGeehan for the answer to that one. (laughs) Well, I don't know. I guess it's because, even though as I mentioned before, the core city area has changed considerably, yet, I think a lot of the people are concerned to make Holland a good place to live. Some of the areas, of course, are not so safe for kids these days, but I think generally speaking, Holland is a good place to live. We are very happy here. We started looking at houses when we were on furlough in 1981, and we actually started buying a house in 1981, even though it was going to be ten years after that that we'd retire. So, we rented that house over the years, and then the rent helped make the payments on it, so it was all paid for by the time we came on retirement. We moved into that place, it's only a short distance from here, but we had to live in it for three years in order not to pay capital gains tax when we sold it. When these were being built, we got interested in this condominium area, and we picked this one out. At least when we first came, all it had was the concrete foundation, and so we could choose how we wanted the inside built.

EB: Oh really? Well, that's nice.

RN: Yes. So, we like this place very much. We're very, very happy here; it's not too far
of a distance from our church and the college and so on. It’ll be a good ten minute drive and you’re at the college, so...

EB: Generation gap in Holland. Have you noticed one between the younger children and yourself?

RN: Well, of course there is a generation gap, but I haven’t felt it personally very much. At least at church with the younger or little kids and so on, there’s no real difference really. There are, of course, the generations that are far apart, but at least with our age and little kids...and it’s true of our grandchildren too. But, you just make those adjustments. So, as far as the generation gap is concerned, it doesn’t bother me at all.

EB: What about with the teenage kids nowadays?

RN: Teenagers now are considerably different than teenagers when I was one. They do things now or think things now that would never have entered my head when I was growing up as a teenager.

EB: Why don’t you expand on that a little bit more?

RN: Even when I was a teenager, I pretty much had to do what my parents said, and you’re older than a teenager by now, but I think teenagers nowadays, they pretty much do what they want to do, and if their parents don’t like it, why, so what, is the impression that I get. I may be completely wrong about that, but my own grandchildren, the teenage ones of our grandchildren tend to be considerably...well, I guess it’s because parents nowadays don’t lay down the law the way my parents did, or all parents at that time did when we were kids. When they said, "no," it meant
EB: That part definitely has changed, I agree.

RN: Yes, very definitely.

EB: Tell me a little bit about how the land itself in Holland has changed, perhaps growth-wise?

RN: Growth-wise, that's for sure. When I was a student at Hope, I didn't have a car to myself, and I would say probably the vast majority of students at that time did not have cars. So, you never really had the opportunity to get out, say, to this far away from the college or anything. But I think, over the years that we have been in Holland on furloughs and so on, well, the north side too and the south side, both have grown fantastically, just spread out so much. A lot of these condominium areas now all over, that when I was a student and when we first came on furlough, we for several years, we lived in a mission house on West Fifteenth Street. That was our knowledge of Holland at that time, just wasn't very large at all. But now, when you have cars and can go wherever you want, then you see how things have grown. The north side especially I think, with all the condominium areas that are out there, and new churches out that way on the north side.

EB: How has religious diversity changed from when you were in college to now?

RN: How do you mean religious diversity?

EB: The different congregation types. Primarily, it was probably Reformed and Christian Reformed, and now the other...

RN: Reformed and Christian Reformed, and of course there was always the Presbyterian
Church and the Methodist Church and the Baptist Church and so on. Now, I think, well, it’s still the preponderances, Reformed and Christian Reformed, but there are many, many other churches now too, which there weren’t back in the days of college and so on. At least, I wasn’t aware of them. But of course, for the first year and a half at least, close to two years, I usually went back to Grand Rapids anyway, and I’d just go to my home church. You may find it interesting that right, almost directly across the street from our house where we lived in southwest Grand Rapids was a Christian Reformed Church, right across the street.

EB: Really?

RN: But, we walked the mile to the Reformed Church. That’s where my mother had grown up, and my dad had always been in the Reformed Church too, so... But, as far as Holland is concerned, at that time, what I was mostly acquainted with, and that was because of walking distance because I didn’t have a car, was First Reformed Church on the corner of Central and College, and Third Reformed which was where it is now at Twelfth and Pine. Then off from the Reformed Church, the Pillar Church. That was about the extent of my knowledge while I was in college, because if I stayed here in town, I usually went to First Reformed. But, of course, now, churches are spread all over and you look at the religion page in the Holland Sentinel where they advertise all the various churches and everything under the sun is there now.

EB: Why don’t you tell me about a significant turning point in your life?

RN: I think one of the very significant points was when I was, I think, about sixteen. At...
that time, I joined the church, became a member by a confession of faith. I think that
was a very definite turning point in my life. Then I think coming to Hope and the
chapel services at the time. Now, as you know, they are three days a week, and I
understand that now, it’s pretty well filled too.

EB: Yes. There’s not much room left.

RN: I haven’t been to any of the services at the chapel. I should get over there and see
what it’s like once. When were there, of course, everybody had to be there, so it
was filled up at that time. I had the pleasure and privilege of singing in--at that time
they had a Men’s Glee Club and a Women’s Glee Club, and what they called the
Chapel Choir--and I sang in the Chapel Choir. But the main thing was the Men’s
Glee Club because the Men’s and the Women’s Glee Club both went on spring tours
every year. One year, the men would go east and the women would go kind of west
or the Iowa area. They didn’t go out to California that I know of. And then the next
year, the men would go that way, and the women would go out east. So, that was a
wonderful experience too. When I was in the Navy, I was in boot camp at Great
Lakes, just north of Chicago. I was in, what they called at that time, the Blue Jacket
Choir, so our whole company of a hundred and thirty guys were, it was a choir
company. We would sing for church services, and every Friday night they had a
program broadcast nationwide, and the Blue Jacket Choir always sang for that too.
So, I’ve had some wonderful experiences music-wise, which played a good part of my
life. Now I am a member of the choir at First Reformed Church, both my wife and
I, and we enjoy that very much too. So, music has really played a good part of our
lives. For the last ten years that we lived in Yokohama, we bought season tickets to the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, which gave concerts in the big concert hall in Yokohama. So, we loved that too. And now, whenever there is good music on at the college, we are there. We enjoy it very much.

EB: You said that you were required to go to Chapel. Why don’t you say a little more about that, and what would happen to a person if they skipped a Chapel service?

RN: Then you were usually called in by the Dean—at that time, the Dean of Men was Milton or Bud Hinga—and you’d get called in, either by him or by, I forget what her position was, anyway, she was one that you frequently would get called into too, but fortunately I guess I didn’t skip Chapel very much at all. When I was a freshman, for some reason or other, I was elected as the president of the freshman class. At that time, the freshman and the sophomores, I suppose like they are now too, but all of a sudden one morning here on the sidewalk near this Van Raalte Hall, was painted on the sidewalk "Fifty," the letters which would have been the class I normally would have graduated in because I started in ’46. Dean Hinga called me into his office and said "You get that off of there!" We didn’t put it on anyway, but boy, we went out there and scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed to get that paint off. Chapel, usually those who skipped, and there probably weren’t that many who skipped very often, but we would get called in by either a Dean, Dean Hinga, or one of the others that had authority over the students. But, Chapel was, it was a good service at that time, because the Chapel was filled and the Chapel choir would always sit in the choir loft. I don’t know how they do it now. Usually for chapel now, is it the Chaplain, Ben
Patterson, Paul Boersma, or one of them? Do they usually lead chapel?

EB: Usually, Ben Patterson will. Sometimes there will be a few of them that might act out a skit to get the message across.

RN: Do any of the faculty ever lead chapel?

EB: No, not that I’ve seen.

RN: Well, see, they used to when we were students. It was always a faculty member. They didn’t have, at that time, what they would call a full-time Chaplain. They had, well yes, a Chaplain, or at least Bible professor, but many, many, and they were usually Christian faculty members of course, would lead chapel and speak. So, it was interesting, from day to day you’d have a different person. Chapel at that time began at, I want to say it was either eight o’clock or eight twenty-five, I forget which only for about a half hour and then the first hour class started at nine, I think. So, Chapel was always early in the morning, the very first thing. And then, you’d go to your classes after that.

EB: I guess you couldn’t very well schedule your classes to sleep in back then could you?

RN: No. We just went right from chapel to classes, if you had first hour class, of course.

EB: Now, you volunteer. Why don’t you talk about that and some other organizations or activities that you may been involved in.

RN: At present, I am one of the calling pastors for First Reformed Church. There are three of us, all retired ministers, and we each have a certain list of people for which we are responsible to call on. So, I do that usually Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. I went out there this afternoon. On Wednesdays and Fridays, I go to the
Archives, and just do whatever they ask me to do there. I started that, I think probably in September or October of 1991. We returned from Japan in May, and then I saw an advertisement for volunteer help in the Sentinel at that time and I thought, well, I’ll go see what it’s like, give it a try. So I’ve been there ever since, just going two afternoons a week from one to five.

EB: Are you involved in any other volunteer work?

RN: No. That takes care of four afternoons a week. My wife does volunteer work for the Good Samaritan Ministries in town. She goes in on Monday mornings for that.

EB: Why don’t you tell me about someone important who has influenced your life.

RN: I think one was my grandfather. I can remember him telling me, "You ought to be a minister." This is when I was like this, growing up. But, he was a very, very spiritual man too, and a wonderful example. He was an elder in the consistory at our church in Grand Rapids, and just a very wonderful man. I think pastors whom we’ve had at the church over the years, and a man like I mentioned, Dr. John Piet, who was very instrumental in going in mission, or at least getting through school so I could get out to the mission field as soon as possible--different people like that. Mainly ministers, I think, who had quite an influence on my life. Different ministers at our church in Grand Rapids.

EB: Well, I guess, I’m out of questions. Do you have anything that we’ve talked about that you’d want to expand on? Or something that maybe we haven’t touched on that maybe you’d like to talk about?

RN: Not really. Just, I guess, there were a lot of good professors at Hope and at the
Seminary who had a very definite influence on me too. Dr. John R. Mulder, who was the president of the Seminary when I was there and he also was a theology professor, and other professors...it was just great to learn from them and to study under them. My Greek professor, Hebrew professor, and several of the professors at the college too. Most of them are all gone now, they have passed on, but they were very wonderful men. Whether you are aware of it or not at the time, you do get a wonderful influence from them. You realize it later, I think. So, that's about it as far as I'm concerned too, I guess.

EB: Well, I guess we'll conclude then. Thank you.