

Interview with Don DeVries

Mark Hoeksema

It is April 12, 2008, and I am at the residence of Mr. Don DeVries, near Randolph, Wisconsin.

MHH: Mr. DeVries, can you tell me where and when you born?

DDV: I was born in Rural Route Randolph, on July 21, 1934.

MHH: What can you tell me about your childhood, your family, anything that you can recall that stands out in your mind? What was life like?

DDV: Life was kind of hard. Things were not easy. My folks were poor. We lived on a farm. When the kids were all born, there were nine of us in the family (eleven with the folks). So we had a big kitchen table full. Growing up wasn't easy, but at the same time we had everything we needed.

MHH: Was your father a farmer?

DDV: My father was a farmer.

MHH: So, I imagine that you and the other children probably worked on that farm?

DDV: We worked on that farm. And I worked on farms till I was 17.

MHH: And then what?

DDV: Then I started plumbing and heating, working for a plumber.

MHH: You've been doing that for a long time.

DDV: It's been a while (laughter).

MHH: What was your church affiliation when you were a child and a youngster?

DDV: We went to East Friesland Christian Reformed Church, and I remember when we were kids, walking the mile over there to catechism. We'd go there on Saturday afternoons. And Sundays, there to church. That's about all I remember—going back and forth. The minister, I remember, his name was Rev. Hoogerdah.

MHH: How long did you attend the Christian Reformed Church there?

DDV: Until the PR church started in Randolph.

MHH: Which was—1943 possibly, 1942?

DDV: Somewhere in there, I forget.

MHH: What made you and your family change church affiliations at that time? What was the history behind that?

DDV: The doctrine history. Because my father and then one of his sisters changed, too. And some of her children changed. And then my folks did that too then.

MHH: Why?

DDV: Because of the doctrinal issues—you know, like the common grace issue. That's kind of what I remember mostly is the common grace issue. But I do remember when we were kids (and then I wouldn't even have been 10 years old yet) then that we would go and hear lectures by Rev. H. Hoeksema. That would be in a park pavilion in Randolph.

MHH: Really?

DDV: That would be in some other buildings, too. But I remember yet going to some of them. That was during the week.

MHH: And he came to lecture against...

DDV: Against the doctrines of common grace.

MHH: So was there opposition to that? Were there family problems? What affect did those lectures have on the population?

DDV: Well, some of them took it to heart and some of them didn't. They didn't want any changes. They didn't want anything else. But there were some of them, they could see the light.

MHH: And that, in turn, led to the formation to the Protestant Reformed congregation in Randolph?

DDV: That's what led to that.

MHH: Do you remember approximately how large the congregation was in the beginning?

DDV: If I am right, it was 8 families.

MHH: And you met where?

DDV: In the old Congregational church.

MHH: Was that on a rental basis?

DDV: That was on a rental basis. We'd have to have church in the afternoon and evening because they would have church in the morning. Then, later on, in the '50s, we bought that basement church from the Christian Reformed Church.

MHH: What memories do you have of the life of the congregation in general? How would you characterize the congregation in Randolph?

DDV: At that time?

MHH: Yes, and, perhaps subsequently.

DDV: I would say that it would be like one big family. Because everybody knew whoever and the get-togethers and even the church picnics on the Fourth of July we would go. In fact, we had a cow pasture right next to the lake, and that's where we had it two or three different times. That would be the church picnic. I won't forget this, either. One of the first church picnics out there, Rev. Lubbers was our minister. Then, of course, he had to have a speech before dinner. Well, when you're a kid, and you sit there for a 45-minute speech on a picnic day, that doesn't go so great (laughter)! But he meant well.

MHH: But you were ready to eat and play!

DDV: That's right.

MHH: Did that harmony that was evident in the early years continue through later history in Randolph, do you think?

DDV: Yes. With the majority. Then there was slowly on more added because families in the church grew up and got married. And then that grows with them.

MHH: Was there any affect, for example, of the division of 1953 on the congregation? Or, maybe it would be better for me to ask what was the effect of the controversy in the '40s and in the '50s?

DDV: Yes, there was some affect, there were some of the families that left us who were originally with us.

MHH: Was this the issue of conditions in the covenant, was it contested and debated a lot, or were these simply a minority of people? Was the church in danger of a division, in your opinion?

DDV: Not really. Because there weren't too many families that were opposed. So it really wasn't a big worry.

MHH: And those who were opposed...

DDV: They left.

MHH: What can you tell me about the various ministers that served in Randolph? What are your memories and your recollections and your opinions?

DDV: Well, Rev. Lubbers was first. I know with Bible class, first we would have it at our house—out on the farm. Then later we had it by him in the study in Randolph, by the park house there. Then after he left, we were vacant. Then H.H. Kuiper came. He was only here a few years and then he left. Then after that there was Emmanuel. He was here a number of years and then, well, there was always one big problem—that his wife never did come to church like she was supposed to. Then we had a problem with that, and we had another sister congregation's consistory come and help us. Then he was more or less disposed of.

MHH: Could you explain that—what the problem was, what some of the history was? What happened and how it was resolved?

DDV: Not all of it because that was kind of in my younger days. I forget what year that he left, but there were also two years when he was here that I was in the army and wasn't even home. By the time I got home, I forget how that all was. But I think right after that, or just before that, that he was out.

MHH: But you don't really know why?

DDV: Not all the details, because I wasn't involved in it yet. And I can't say for sure. But I know it was some doctrinal issues and a whole lot of it was family issues.

MHH: Do you know whatever happened to him?

DDV: I heard that he went out east to some church. The last I heard he was in a church in Florida. But I think he's retired from it by now.

MHH: So, after he was no longer there, what happened next?

DDV: Then we were without [*a minister*] for some years. Then we called Rev. VanBaren. He was here three years or so. After that we were without for awhile. Then Rev. Dale Kuiper was here. That was only a few years. But we had a lot of years in between that we didn't have a minister and we relied on Classis East to fill most of [*our pulpit*]. We got married in 1959, and then a year or so later I got put in consistory. I was in and out of consistory for the next 30+ years. But that was OK. But anyway, I know we had a lot of years when we had to teach Bible class and all that stuff. Then Rev. Ken Koole was here.

MHH: And Bekkering was maybe in the mix there someplace too?

DDV: Bekkering was here before Ken Koole, I think. Yes, Bekkering and then Koole. And then we had Rev. Slopsema and Rev. denHartog.

MHH: But, during the years of vacancy, if I understand you correctly, a fairly heavy burden fell on the elders.

DDV: Very heavy. Yes. And there were quite a few years in between times that we had to take care of everything.

MHH: And, in your opinion, were the elders able to do that?

DDV: Well, yes and no. We all feel that we were not able to. But, at the same time, we were compelled to do so and to do it to the best of our ability. That's how that went.

MHH: And Randolph has survived?

DDV: And Randolph has survived. We were not going to close any doors. No.

MHH: Randolph's survival or continuance was, to your knowledge, never really an issue?

DDV: There was never a question.

MHH: Strong people.

DDV: Yes. No, that was never a concern.

MHH: So, would you say on balance that life, from the perspective of the church, life in general was positive for you?

DDV: It was positive and at the same time it was good. As the congregation got older and the kids got married within the church, you could see some generations coming up, and it all looked very positive.

MHH: Now we all know that Randolph has a new church building and, in fact, it is going to add on to that. And Randolph also has a fairly new Christian school. Were you involved in the Christian school movement here in Randolph?

DDV: Yes and no. I didn't belong to the society. Yet we supported the school, and we would go to all the school functions. When the school was built, we gave them a break—we did all the plumbing and heating, the whole works, too. So I figure we did our share for that to help them out.

MHH: Do you see benefits to the congregation from having our own school?

DDV: Oh, yes, very much so. That's a big benefit. And if I'm not mistaken, even now this past year, all the kids from church go to our school. Yes, it's been good.

MHH: So that has also helped and to draw the congregation together?

DDV: That would keep it together, yes.

MHH: So there is, in your opinion, good support for the school, then?

DDV: I would say there is good support. Collections have been good and everybody cooperates. It seems to be going real good.

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