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de Velder, Marion Oral History Interview: Former RCA and Protestant Reformed Church Executives

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HOPE COLLEGE LIVING HERITAGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
1979

Dr. Marion de Velder

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INTRODUCTION

The HOPE COLLEGE LIVING HERITAGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT consists of a series of interviews conducted during the summer of 1977 with Nancy A. Swinyard and the summer of 1978 with Conrad J. Strauch, Jr. with past administrators and professors of Hope College. In the summer of 1979, the project dealt with the Reformed Churches and their development. Interviews were conducted by Derk Michael Strauch with past Reformed Church in America Executives and the Rev. Homer Hoeksema of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Upon completion of each session, the taped interview was transcribed and then edited by the interviewer and the interviewee to assure clarity in the interview. While the accuracy of the transcript is desirable, the viewpoint of the interviewee is maintained. Some alterations were suggested by the interviewer during the interview and in later correspondences, but the researcher will discover discrepancies between the interviews themselves and with published materials. Therefore, the researcher must be aware that these discrepancies exist, and seek to understand the perspective from which all statements were made. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Archives of Hope College.

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

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean of the Humanities and the Fine Arts, this project would not have become a reality. Special thanks go to Dr. Elton J. Bruins, professor of Religion at Hope College, who gave constant help and encouragement to the project even though he was busy with his own pursuits. The success of this project can be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees, each gracious, receptive and cooperative.

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The interview with Dr. Marion de Velder deals mainly with the structuring of the Reformed Church as it now stands in 1979. Even the changes that are added by the General Synod of 1979 in Holland, Michigan are in the interview. Dr. de Velder was also gracious enough to add some definite, pinpointed quotes and locations in the editing of the interview.

The interview opens with Dr. de Velder's seminary education and early pastorates. We then moved into his pastorate in the Hope Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan where a great deal of insight into the personality of this past General Secretary can be found. It deals mainly with his viewpoints on the Second World War and with the conscientious objectors in Vietnam War as these were points of extreme interest and witness for Dr. de Velder.

From the political, or Church Polity, point of view, Dr. de Velder gives valuable information into the mindset of the people who restructured the National Headquarters. He covers everything from the restructuring of the Stated Clerk position to the formation of the General Program Council (GPC) and the structuring of the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC). As these abbreviations are used throughout the transcript, I have placed them here for reference.

Any biographical information about Dr. de Velder can be obtained from the Western Theological Seminary Archives, where there is a sixteen page, detailed account of his life and of his assignments to committees and Boards. I did not feel the need to duplicate this material as it is on file already.

Interview with
DR. MARION de VELDER
at his home in
Holland, Michigan
on
July 16, 1979
and
July 17, 1979
with
Derk M. Strauch

STRAUCH: I'd like to begin with your seminary education. You stated earlier that you attended New Brunswick as opposed to Western. What lead you to New Jersey?

de VELDER: I had graduated from Central College in 1934. My brother, Walter, is five years older than I am. He had gone to China as a short term missionary, or a teacher of English and Physical Education, in the China Mission. He came home early because of the Communist uprising in China and he went directly to New Brunswick Seminary because he had married a daughter of Dr. John Otte, a veteran medical missionary to China. She had a job in the Sage library for \$100 a month. So it was economically advantageous for me to go to New Brunswick. When I got through Central in 1934, there was no money whatever. So I applied to New Brunswick. My brother wanted me very much to come. I had free rent in Herzog Hall and free books. I assisted my brother with household work and laundry duties and so forth, for three meals a day at their apartment. So I had my room and board secured and I got a position as a student assistant in the First Reformed Church of New Brunswick where Dr. Jasper Hogan was the minister, a grand and wonderful minister. And I got \$350 for that school year for being student assistant. And, believe it or not, I had enough money saved at the end of nine months to buy a used car. And I went to the Griggstown Reformed Church as student pastor during my seminary course. My brother had done that, and I succeeded him. And that was at \$15 a week. At the end of my junior year, my wife and I got married. That was a little unheard of in those days. There were only one or two other married couples in the seminary. And we continued living in New Brunswick in the apartment there on campus. I served the Griggstown Church for two years as a student pastor, doing mostly preaching but some attending of Consistory meetings and some youth work, also visiting in the homes only on Sunday for dinner and supper, the noon dinner and supper.

And since they had 33 families in the Church, it was possible to visit one home during each Sunday and that was about the extent of the pastoral work. It was quite an adventurous thing to go from Iowa to New Brunswick. The Western Church was very uncertain about the New Brunswick Seminary as far as its orthodoxy was concerned, and that's why it was a risky thing. But I was very grateful to go to New Brunswick because of the advantage of being able to go, and having really no funds for seminary education. I did not want to take aid from the Board of Education of the Church; I wanted to be independent.

STRAUCH: After that you went into the pastorate, with the largest part at Hope Church.

de VELDER: Not directly, Derk. I was called to the North and South Hampton Reformed Church in Churchville, Pennsylvania in 1937. In fact, I started preaching there in January of my senior year, twice a month. I got off from the Griggstown Church. This was one of the strongest churches in the east, that is, rural churches, and it was a wonderful opportunity for us to serve at Churchville. I was there for a little over two years and then was called to Hope Church in Holland, Michigan. This was such a tremendous advance in my ministerial career that I became convinced that Hope Church in Holland was an unusually fine opportunity not only, but had a lot of connections with Hope College. Being a young minister I would be able to so work not only for the congregation but for the college students as well.

STRAUCH: Do you think that there was any specific reason why Hope College and Hope Church shared in this relationship?

de VELDER: Yes, because the first president of Hope College, Dr. Phillip Phelps, was also the founder of Hope Church. The seal of Hope College is identical to the seal of Hope Church except the wording; they were both drawn by Dr. Phelps. So Hope Church was an English-speaking church from the beginning, really the second Reformed Church, after the Pillar church in Holland. It appealed mostly to

the businessmen and professional men and to English-speaking people, so it had a distinctive background and personality from the beginning.

STRAUCH: Also while you were at Hope Church, the Second World War started.

de VELDER: Yes, the first Sunday that I started in Hope Church was the first Sunday of September, 1939. Before I went to preach that morning, I listened to the news and Britain and France had declared war on Germany. Before I went to the church I said to my wife, "we're going to be getting into this war quite soon." That was quite a prediction because for the next twenty years, practically all the time, we were at war, the Second World War and the Korean War. That experience alone was quite an experience, because as I look back on it, we had 108 men from the Hope Church congregation serving in the Armed Forces. Since most of them were college graduates, they became First Lieutenants and other kinds of intelligence officers. As I recall we lost eight of them by death and some of these situations were really tragic. We kept in touch with these 108 boys through our Women's Club and Men's Club and through a pastoral letter every month. And letters were written by members of these organizations and packages were sent by the women's organization. So that later when the war concluded, many of these young men returned to Holland, and many with young families. They became the new core of vital life at Hope Church. I think we had in the Couples Club about 88 couples after the war. And on one occasion I baptised 23 babies on a Sunday. Those were the hey-days, after the war, in the Church when everything seemed to flow toward the Church, at least in Holland.

STRAUCH: It still seems to flow toward the Church in Holland.

de VELDER: Yes, it does, more so than in some places.

STRAUCH: From a newspaper clipping that I read it seems that you spoke out against the idea that the Second World War was a "holy war."

de VELDER: Yes, there were two occasions, Derk, when I got into some difficulty. The veterans organizations had an annual meeting around Memorial Day in Holland

and they selected a minister to give what they called a sermon. I did at that time speak about the commitment of the Christian to be a peacemaker and that we should heal and reconcile people and that while the threat of war in WWII was very great, we had to move on to better relationships as nations of the world as well as people. And Christians could bridge these gaps. That, in my opinion, rather mild sermon caused some consternation and I was under some criticism from my own people and a few patriotic people who at that time wished to have a committee in the church to assist me in writing my sermons. I resisted that and got the admiration from the leaders of the Church so that I was never again challenged on what I should say in the pulpit. I said that I was a trained theologian, at least that was what I thought I was. On another occasion, war bonds were being sold, called Liberty Bonds, to support the war. A very enthusiastic businessman, one of the top ones in Holland, in his enthusiasm decided that he would ask all the ministers to make announcements in the pulpit on Sunday urging people to buy war bonds. And I had a colleague in Third Reformed Church at that time, Rev. William Van't Hof, who was even more concerned than I was. He was a pacifist, and I wasn't a pacifist. We went together to the Common Council meeting which was where this was being challenged. We spoke against the matter of a minister of the Gospel promoting war bonds from the pulpit. To our surprise we were roundly supported by the Common Council. This man for a long time was not very friendly toward us, but we prevented any selling, or promoting of war bonds from the pulpits in Holland, Michigan. It was rather exciting, and we didn't know where it would lead.

STRAUCH: Then the Vietnam War came about; a student Jim Rubins, spoke out against the war, at the NCC Assembly in 1969 concerning his draft card. What did the Reformed Church do about the conscientious objectors?

de VELDER: Oh, that's a long story, Derk. I remember Jim Rubins very well,

I can still visualize him. This came to a head in 1969 in the National Council of Churches Assembly in 1969 in Detroit. Jim Rubins was there as a student representative from the Reformed Church, we had two or three others and a delegation of 11 voting members. And Jim Rubins at one point wanted to give his draft card to the NCC to hold it for him, because he was a conscientious objector. You can imagine the discussions that went on during this assembly at which there were many other issues, but this was the important and most powerful one. The NCC voted twice whether to accept Jim Rubins' draft card. Both votes were by more than a majority vote. And it was thought that this settled the matter. But a parliamentarian found out that this kind of a vote needed a two-thirds majority and so the matter was dropped because the two-thirds majority was not reached. It was very interesting to me that in the dynamics of all that discussion there were 11 voting members in the Reformed Church delegation, including two attorneys, one from Sioux Center, Iowa and one from New Jersey. Both of these attorneys joined the rest of the delegation in voting unanimously to accept the draft card. That's unusual, because attorneys generally advise not to get into civil disobedience of any kind. There were two ministers in the delegation from Michigan and both of them voted for it twice. I was on the platform of the NCC because I was the recording secretary. Incidentally, one of the radicals during the meeting ran across that large stage with a can of red paint and poured it over us, because he said "the blood of all these people be on you." I still have two notebook covers that are covered with red paint as a memento that I will not give up. But that delegation of 11, (and there were several women on the delegation) voted twice to accept the draft card of Jim Rubins. Someone on the stage asked me, "de Velder, how did you get your RCA delegation to vote the way you instructed them to vote?" I remember I got quite angry and told him, "these people are too intelligent to receive an instruction

from anybody. Each one of those persons is voting according to their conscience." This made an impression on the person asking the question. (Personally now, looking back on it, if the NCC had accepted Jim Rubins' draft card, we would have gotten into legal procedures which might have taken several years and would have damaged the NCC.) But after the vote was declared as lost, and the draft card was not accepted, then in sustaining our support of Jim Rubins I asked to make a statement, a personal privilege which I did. It took about five minutes, it was completely extemporaneous. It was reported erroneously in our own Church Herald that I had advised that all Church members should withhold payment of their income tax. This was reported as a categorical statement in quotes. And then I was really in trouble. When I got the tape, and I knew what I had said of course, because I was very careful in my statement, (it was later transcribed verbatim)-- what I said was that "we might have to consider, if this matter continued to accelerate, that we might have to consider as Christians to withhold payment of our income tax." Fortunately the NCC had this on tape, I got the transcript and sent the remarks out to my executive committee and the problem was then defused. Some people came up afterwards and said that my support of Jim Rubins, as a person's right to be a conscientious objector, was probably the highlight of the assembly. I don't know if that's true. Incidentally, after that occasion, Carl McIntyre, the former United Presbyterian fire-brand, sent a wire to the U.S. Justice Department saying that I ought to be interviewed and investigated and that this matter needed attention. About two months later, in my office in New York, I did see an FBI and a Justice Department man for about two hours, and had an excellent interchange. In June of 1969, there had been four young men, including a nephew of mine, John de Velder, who asked the General Synod to receive their draft cards, (in New Brunswick, a meeting at Douglas College.) The Synod debated that for a long time. These were our own boys, in our own assembly, and this was referred to a committee. Finally upon the advice of legal counsel it was decided not to receive those draft

cards. It was a disappointment to some people. But in the meantime it was known that a layperson's ad hoc committee was being formed of about twenty to thirty people. The chairman of that committee was known but all the members were not known. And this committee, which was an unofficial group, accepted these four draft cards and held them for quite awhile. One of them was Glenn Pontier, who later did some time in prison because he would not perform his alternate service, as they called it. So that's the way it was handled within the Reformed Church. My legal council advised me, as General Secretary of the RCA, not to accept a draft card because of the legal implications--that this would not serve the Church well. But I was in sympathy with the matter. Some of the delegates thought that John de Velder was my son, therefore there were some problems with that interpretation. He was my nephew, the son of the missionary, my brother Walter. This problem has been with us all the time. But it was difficult in those days and we had to tread very carefully so that we didn't needlessly offend people. Yet we supported the right, as the Bible states, "To obey God rather than men," as we must do at certain times. But the young men were caught in the meat grinder during those days, and a lot of the people who gave free advice were, of course, beyond the age of military service. These young men deeply appreciated that the leaders of the Church were willing to stand by them.

STRAUCH: Let us start moving into the office itself. You first served the whole denomination as the Stated Clerk. What were the responsibilities of your position when you arrived?

de VELDER: Well, I was elected Stated Clerk in 1961, and I was succeeding a man, Rev. James Hoffman, who had been in the office for 19 years. He had served the first two years as acting Stated Clerk and then became Stated Clerk for the next 17 years. So he served nineteen years in all, and you can imagine with that long tenure he had tremendous experience in the life of the Church. However, during that period it was mostly a clerical position. He served as the recording clerk

of the General Synod and did a number of other things. Until two years before he retired it was not considered a full time position because he was, believe it or not, also Director of Visual Aids of the Reformed Church in America. And James Hoffman was the kind of man who was willing to serve the denomination in any kind of necessary task. He spent a good deal of his time as director of Visual Aids for the Church. He was also serving as secretary of what they call the Staff Council, or Staff Conference. This was an informal conference of the Executive Secretaries at Church Headquarters who, while the boards were all separate, agreed to work together for the interest of the Kingdom of God and the RCA. They meet once a month. James served as the secretary for many years, labouriously taking the minutes of the things they discussed. If you would look back in those minutes of the things they discussed, they did not only discuss matters of national import, but matters of housekeeping at the Church Headquarters. Sometimes it appeared that they spent more time talking about house-keeping details than about matters of national policy. All of them were reluctant to give the impression that they were forming policy for the Reformed Church in America. They did go to General Synod and most of them in those days made strong speeches and appeals to General Synod and got their own proposals adopted. After General Synod they really made a serious attempt to coordinate purposes with one another. But that's what Hoffman did, he also carried on correspondence with Classes and the Particular Synods. On occasion he represented the RCA at ecumenical meetings. So his job was not a key position. He was really in charge of a number of details that were given to him by the General Synod and from the Staff Conference, and even served as Director of Visual Aids. When he made known that he would retire because he would be 65 years of age, the General Synod appointed a committee to study the office of the Stated Clerk. I know that among others, Bernard Mulder was one of the persons who said that this position must be made a more integral part of the Life of the Church. Norman Thomas, (Dr. Norman Thomas who had been at New Brunswick, who was Dean for

many years) was the Chairman of that committee. There were about 5 or 6 key persons on it and they studied the office and the responsibilities of the Stated Clerk. They reported at the 1961 Synod, and not only on the responsibilities but also recommended my appointment. The committee, in general terms did a number of things; they recommended first of all, that the Stated Clerk must be the executive officer of the General Synod. They also said he must be the ecumenical representative of the Reformed Church at all ecumenical meetings, and he must be freed from all the office details by the appointment of an assistant, or an associate, who ought to be a layman, skilled in organization and finance, and have a proper supporting staff. All of this of course was necessary, and it was overdue. And I suppose it was impossible to have that kind of new profile for the office while Dr. Hoffman was serving out his time. So this committee came in with this rather ambitious report in 1961. I knew all about it, of course, because I had been interviewed. I was then at the Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids and had been there less than two years. But the committee sent two extremely capable laymen over to interview me. One was Ekdal Buys, well known in the Reformed Church, and the other layman was Max De Pree who is now chairman of the Board of Trustees of Herman Miller. Those two men appeared in my office one day and said they would like to have an hour or two with me. I said, "what are you coming here for?" And they said, "we would like you to consider being the Stated Clerk of the Reformed Church." I replied that I was being interrupted in getting 'geared up' in a large parish in Grand Rapids. I said that I had been there less than two years and it was impossible, I can't consider it. I informed them, I have a commitment here and it can't be considered. They said, "Would you listen to what we have to say for an hour or so why we think you should consider it?" So I said, Of course, my friends I'll listen to you. By turns they sketched out why I should come. I found most of it quite reasonable - it was necessary, they said, for the Reformed Church in this new expanded position to have a person who is known both in the east and the west of the Church,

who had denominational experience, who had worked on the great fund drive and so forth. It finally ended when I said that I will consider this carefully. They also said to me, "You can't close the door on this without thinking and praying about it." I said that I would do so and I will talk it over with my wife. They asked, "What can we expect in the future," and I said within two days you will have an answer whether I will be willing to stand for election or not. They liked the short time for that decision. I went then and talked to my wife. Its a long story and we decided, in the course of several days, that this was almost a draft situation and that, if elected, I would have to accept. Then I had to deal with Central Church--they had just called me from Holland, Michigan. And I could only say to them, "Look, I served Hope Church twenty years. I'm not one to run away from a responsibility." But this responsibility, if the General Synod elects me, (which they later reported to me was unanimous) I decided I would accept. Now at the same time, Derk, the General Synod Executive Committee was appointed in 1961. And that's another story. That committee was a thrilling committee to work with and I was able for 16 years to work with an Executive committee that the Reformed Church had never had before.

STRAUCH: Why was that committee started at the same time? What was the need?

de VELDER: As early as 1959, when I served that year as president of General Synod, Howard Hageman was the Vice-president at that time. He was succeeded later by Henry Bast, who had been a professor at Western Seminary. During that time, when I was president, we were faced with a demand to call a special meeting of the General Synod. This meant that, according to the Constitution, and the proper application of ministers and elders in the Classis (they did have the required number) we would have to call a special meeting of the General Synod, which would cost the Reformed Church probably \$25,000. It was an unheard of prospect. The issue that came up had to do with a special charge of a student being unorthodox. The question was "who was to make this decision to call a

special meeting of the General Synod?" I was the president, and I had Howard Hageman as Vice-president and James Hoffman as Stated Clerk. That was the so-called executive committee of General Synod. So it depended on just three persons. This great Reformed Church of ours with its long history had an executive committee of three. The president then was serving as the presiding officer, the vice-president was not even that important, the Stated Clerk had been there a long time but he did not want to take the responsibility, and the treasurer was a technical-financial person from Bronxville, New York. So we had meetings and we decided that we would not call the meeting. This was really illegal, since we were required to call a meeting. (By the way the one who was behind this was Rev. Harry Hager of Chicago who was trying to get this special meeting.) Well, this was the so-called William Coventry Case in New Jersey, Passaic Classis. He had been accused of being unorthodox. Fortunately, before we made the final decision, some of the people who asked for the special meeting were willing to withdraw their request. Then it became a technical matter, whether they were legally permitted to withdraw. Well, we just assumed that they could. We were under real criticism later about not calling the meeting, but everybody was happy that we didn't call the meeting. So that was a rare situation. But as I recall, Hageman and I then became determined that the General Synod needed to have a proper Executive Committee, which could serve the Reformed Church in between the meetings of General Synod. So Hageman and I began to talk about it. The General Synod must have an executive committee, properly constituted and with authority to act between the meetings of General Synod. We were not ready to make the proposal as we wanted to make it, but were thinking about it. In the mean time, Henry Bast, who was vice-president of General Synod, said "that's absolutely necessary." Well, now we had an ally from the strongly conservative west and we said to Henry Bast, "let's meet" and, as President of General Synod, he called us into session, Howard Hageman and myself, at Newark, New Jersey. (I remember it was Howard's Church.) We had long dis-

cussions and Henry Bast said "I will propose it, as president of the General Synod in June 1961." So Henry Bast in his President's Report recommended the Executive Committee. (Minutes of General Synod, 1961 p.271, 272.) Now what, you ask, is the Executive Committee? It was a committee of 21. Can you imagine such a committee? It was handpicked (after it was adopted). The format was adopted at General Synod in 1961. It consisted of the following: the president and the vice-president of General Synod, the two elected officers by the Reformed Church. No one should quarrel about that because they were elected. It consisted also of the three past presidents of General Synod. In other words, this was a really remarkable proposal, to have the three past presidents of General Synod. We had five persons, who had been elected by the Reformed Church to the highest office, serving as the central core. Then we have 6 particular Synods. So the Particular Synods were asked to nominate to the executive committee, a minister and an elder. Of course they were all men, because in those days we didn't have women elders. That made twelve more. So we had five and twelve, or seventeen. Then, in order to make it a little more open, Henry Bast proposed that there be three members at large, and that they be elders. They should be laymen, because generally the officers were ministers. They had to be laymen, or elders, who had particular expertise, such as law, finance or some other field of organization. Now, of course, the total came to 21 persons. Henry Bast came in with nominations of the finest group he could find. And the General Synod approved that group, and that group was together for the first four years without any turnover. Bast nominated a minister and elder from each of the particular synods. And there was no question that they were acceptable. I was elected Stated Clerk and the General Synod Executive Committee was convened in September of 1961. We started together, the Stated Clerk in a new expanded position, and the GSEC, who were the top leaders in the Reformed Church. It was a thrill to know that I had a supporting group like that. Henry Bast wisely said "lets try it for three years on a trial basis. If we like it, then the fourth year we'll

adopt it as a permanent matter of the Constitution." He didn't propose a Constitutional amendment. He said "let's have a trial committee for a while and then we'll ask the committee to recommend whether or not they ought to be a permanent body and constituted." That happened, and the fourth year it was Constitutionally provided for after we had run through three years of experience. In 1964, it became a matter of Constitutional provision, and it has served ever since.

STRAUCH: Has GSEC changed at all since its beginnings?

de VELDER: Yes, it does have women on it now. It's had two women and it will now also have some representation from the minority councils. The Black Council, the Hispanic Council and the American Indian Council in turn will be nominating a person to the GSEC. This year it was determined to enlarge it by three members, so it will be 24 instead of 21.

STRAUCH: Aside from GSEC, what other organizational institutions were there at the RCA Headquarters?

de VELDER: Well, the organizational structure at headquarters was actually five Independent boards. They were the Board of World Mission, North American Mission, Education, Stewardship Council and the Board of Pensions. Outside of the stewardship council, the other four boards were all incorporated; it came into being about as early as 1836 or somewhere around there. So many of them were well over a hundred years old as a separate corporation. And there had been overtures from the Church all through the fifties for a more efficient operation of the RCA. These overtures kept coming and we were given study, and there was no way to properly handle this until we had a General Synod Executive Committee. So in 1961, one of the first matters of agenda for the GSEC, referred to it by the General Synod, was to study the demoninational structure. That is, the restructuring of the national program of the Reformed Church, to deal with the matter of how the boards are to work together. That was the main concern about our organizational structure, and we worked on it immediately.

STRAUCH: Were there any "unlegislative" changes?

de VELDER: Well, one of the remarkable features of this whole business was that the GSEC was appointed by the General Synod on a trial basis for three years and really didn't have any legal standing. It had to prove itself. It had to make itself acceptable, it had to sell itself to the Reformed Church. Which is a strange way to go at it, but it seemed to be the best way. Now the GSEC in those days could do a lot of things that may have been almost illegal, but it did them because it was asked to work on them. Afterwards, in 1964, when all of the duties of the GSEC were listed carefully and adopted as a matter of the Constitution of the RCA, then we could talk in terms of "legal" and "illegal" using the eleven or twelve responsibilities listed. There was then a standard of judgement. The GSEC was responsible. It could have been irresponsible, but I don't think that it was. It was sometimes accused of being a little too hard on the Boards, but was a good thing, I think, and instead of having legal authority, we had to work in the framework of cooperation and appeal. Working with the Boards in that manner, we got their cooperation, even though sometimes they were reluctant. Just as a matter of record, the Board of Pensions didn't come under the national structure until about five years after the restructuring, because the Board of Pensions was not willing to cooperate. They came in about four or five years after they should have. But it came in. And I don't think the question of legality was raised because of what I call the genius of Henry Bast's saying "let's have a three-year trial run and see how it goes once." When a Dutch man says "Let's try it once", it means that--lets try it--and it worked. Now we could have made the mistake of pulling rank and authority, and bumped heads together and we would have had great controversy. But that didn't happen, because of the caliber of the leaders.

STRAUCH: You have mentioned that originally there were no women on the GSEC.

de VELDER: One of the requirements of GSEC was that the laymen from the Church had to be elders. At that time, in 1961, women were not serving as elders. They

didn't get to serve as elders until 1972. Even then there were not many women elected. But some of the Synods, the Synod of New York and the Synod of New Jersey, appointed women elders to the GSEC. This was a good thing. We got the women's viewpoint and the women were excellent selections and they did a good job. I think in the future there will be more women, but for a long time, a majority of the GSEC will be men. A woman has not been elected president or vice-president of General Synod.

STRAUCH: You said that in 1972 women were able to be elected to serve as elders.

de VELDER: And Deacons...

STRAUCH: Were there as many hassles then as with the Women's Ordination Issue at this past Synod?

de VELDER: There has always been a lot of consternation about women serving in any of the offices of the Church. In 1972 they were given the privilege of serving as elders and deacons, the Book of Church Order was amended, "male" was taken out of the qualifying. For many years, first the Reformed Church tried to deal with all the offices as one, Minister, Elder and Deacon, which is a Calvinistic concept. This failed repeatedly, so finally they separated the offices, Elders and Deacons, and it passed. Then later on in the RCA an elder was given the privilege (by authorization of the Consistory) to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is an amazing thing to me, that they were willing to do that. In the Reformed Church we were in the position that a woman elder, upon authorization of her Consistory, could administer baptism and the Communion although not being allowed to be ordained as Minister of the Word. We had a lot of inconsistencies. Most of the Sunday schools or Church School teachers in the Reformed Church were women and the mission societies were composed of women. In the General Synod this year they reported statistics based on a survey that 56.5% of the total membership of the RCA were women and that 43.5% were men. So all these things finally were resolved in the judicial procedure of 1979, and it was determined that these particular women could serve as ministers. I think we have now a landmark decision that, while some Classes may still refuse to

ordain women, the matter has really been resolved. Women meeting all the qualifications will now normally be ordained in the Reformed Church in America. The Book of Church Order does not prohibit it according to the action of the General Synod (172) of 1979.

STRAUCH: As Stated Clerk, you had to come in contact with the Reformed Church schools. It has always been a question as to what is the relationship between the Church and her schools. What was your view of this in office?

de VELDER: Well, when I came as Stated Clerk of the General Synod, the three colleges were related to the General Synod largely through the Board of Education. And the Board of Education had people representing the colleges either sitting as members of the Board, or there were the three presidents as members of the Board of Education of the RCA. Dr. Bernard Mulder was then secretary. And throughout that period it was a good relationship, but the colleges generally felt that they were not properly recognized by the Reformed Church and that this was a sort of subordinate relationship. They complained a number of times, and I think rightly so. As a part of the Board of Education, they felt the normal work of the Board of Education was getting the attention, and they were not. So during the course of my tenure there, the Board of Education went out of existence in 1968, and the General Program Council (GPC) became the program arm of the RCA. The colleges were not a part of that. Now during this period of time, the program secretary of the GPC and the General Secretary met many times with the college presidents. I can recall meeting upon meeting. These were very valuable meetings. Out of those meetings the RCA developed a "Covenant of Obligations." A covenant with the colleges, which has been printed in the minutes of General Synod for about five years. It is a great and meaningful statement about what the colleges owe to the Church and what the Church owes to the Colleges. And during the time of the restructuring of the RCA a number of attempts were made to assist the colleges, particularly in raising funds. I think it is interesting that in all of the large financial drives in the RCA,

with the exception of the Church Growth Fund, the majority of the funds went to the colleges. In the early days, they probably went to the Board of World Missions, but in the last years, they went to the colleges--more than 50% of that money. But it was never enough. We had in the Reformed Church three four-year colleges. Many people argued that we didn't need that many colleges. Two of them were in Iowa, only 300 miles apart, and a second one in Holland, Michigan. People argued that we should have a college in the east, for the eastern constituency, one in the west and one on the west coast. We had many, many discussions like that. And the college presidents were with us through General Synod, reporting through the standing committee on Higher Education. Some progress was made during those years, but more and more the colleges moved to independence from the Reformed Church as far as their own operation and accountability was concerned. All three colleges, and Hope and Central were the two first ones, began later to work with financial consulting firms like Marts and Lundy and others. These large consulting firms set up their campaigns and they were on their own. These appeals, approved by the GSEC and raised millions of dollars were raised by Hope College and Central College and Northwestern College. Many people felt that that would hurt the giving of the Church quite a bit, but in my opinion, it never did really hurt. Most of the money that they got was mainly from money that may not have been given by the Reformed Church anyway. We started in 1973 what we called the "Staff Consulting Group". Let me back up a moment. As early as 1965 we started a committee of staff executives at Church Headquarters (called COSE). As General Secretary, I meet with the executives of all these boards in regular session, sometimes weekly, sometimes every two weeks, always once a month, to discuss "how do we coordinate our work together." We discovered that the colleges were more concerned about being a part of the Reformed Church Program. They wanted to draw more students from the Reformed Church and so in 1973 we got the idea of having a staff consulting group. And this group greatly enlarged this context. It picked up representatives from the colleges and from the Editorial Council of the Church Herald, from the

Women's Department, and from the Particular Synods, both the GPC Service Centers and the judicatories. The Staff Consulting Group meets about three or four times a year and in it they discuss how to develop a total program for the Reformed Church. Now the colleges really pushed for that. It's been a good thing. The General Secretary was named the Chairman of the Staff Consulting Group, so it was my duty for five years. Arie Brouwer has continued that. This group reports to the GSEC and they take the report to the General Synod. They will generally come up with proposals on financial drives and all that sort of thing--everything that needs coordination between the total group--not only the GPC, but also the Church Herald, and the seminaries, and the colleges, and the women's work of the Church, and the minority councils. This is developed in an informal discussion in the Staff Consulting Group. They don't pass a lot of motions. In fact, during the five years, we probably sent up to the GSEC about half a dozen recommendations, but they were excellent recommendations. It might be on special financial appeals or some needed coordination. Out of the Staff Consulting Group came the idea of the overall denominational program and mission and at this year's General Synod those missions goals for the Reformed Church were recognized as being a real part of the Reformed Church.

STRAUCH: Then it was in 1968 that the GPC came into existence.

de VELDER: Yes, let me go into that for a moment. In 1961, when I was appointed to the GSCE one of the main concerns of the Reformed Church was that the Boards of the Church should work together. Overtures had come in for a number of years on why should we have 5 separate Boards. In addition to that we had an Editorial Council that was separate, (number six). Then we had two seminaries and three colleges (about 11 separate entities). How were we to coordinate all the bodies into the one RCA program? Well, the first thing that the GSEC did was to look at this problem that they should work towards a merger, as they called it in those days, a merger of the boards. And when they talked about a merger of the Boards they talked about the Boards of Education, World Missions, North American Missions, Stewardship

Council and Pensions. Those were the boards at Church Headquarters, and they would work together. You couldn't talk about the "one corporation" concept at the outset, but that was the ultimate goal, to get all of these into one organizational structure. Now I think, Derk, that I ought to say that as I looked at the denominational structure in the various denominations, particularly in the UP Church, (the United Presbyterian Church), and the PCUS (Presbyterian Church in the United States), they have had a lot of trouble with their structure, more than the RCA. Maybe it was because the RCA was a little smaller, and we were more manageable, I don't know. But I think there is another reason. When the GSEC confronted this problem of how shall we bring these five boards together -- how should we get at this-- we studied it in the GSEC, and they ended up by appointing a sub-committee of four. They were all laymen. This always intrigued me. For once, the ministers of the Church were willing to give a matter of major importance to laymen. The personnel of that sub-committee was: Max De Pree, who is now chairman of the Board of Herman Miller, was named the Chairman of the sub-committee on denominational structure. And Ekdal Buys, a broker from Grand Rapids, who was well known in the laymen's work of the Reformed Church. And two lawyers, which interested me, because lawyers aren't always creative. One was a Wall Street lawyer, Arad Riggs, who had been in New York for many years. He was a person who did a lot of work for a number of national foundations, and he knew the Reformed Church. He was also the president of the Board of Direction of the Reformed Church. The other one was a lawyer, Maurice Te Paske, from Sioux Center, Iowa, who was probably the outstanding layperson in the Reformed Church-- Mayor of his town since the age of 26, a very outstanding person who was totally committed to the Church personally. Those four people were appointed. Then the committee said, "de Velder, as Stated Clerk, you work with them for us." And the Committee decided to pull in, as consultant an industrial psychologist, Dr. Douglas Blocksma from Grand Rapids. Blocksma is consultant to a number of industries in Western Michigan. Douglas Blocksma was known for many years. He had done the personality profiles on the missionary staff for both World and North American

Missions. In other words, candidates for these missions were sent to Blocksma and he gave them a personality review and wrote up a recommendation. So Blocksma was known and trusted. That committee went to work, six of us with two as consultants, under the chairmanship of Max De Pree, who I think was one of the earliest competent people in organizational development. He also understood accountability. People claimed that there was no accountability in the Reformed Church since the Boards went directly to the General Synod in those days, where the secretaries would make their pleas. Well, the committee went to work and we reported to every meeting, of the General Synod Executive Committee meeting, which met four times a year. And we developed, under Max's leadership, an outline of how to approach the organizational problem. That outline was worked on for about two years. What were the elements, the responsibilities, and the representation, how should this be approached and all that? And finally the GSEC adopted the outline for the study of our organizational structure. Now what was it? They recommended that as early as 1966 we should have an office of administration and finance. It made no sense for each of these five boards to administer through their own treasurers and financial people their own accounts. And set up an Office of Administration and Finance for this, which was done as early as 1966. That was the first proposal of this committee to be adopted in the Synod. Then about 1966, the outline was adopted, and this is all a matter of record, so I won't go into that. One of the proposals was to engage at that next stage, an organizational consulting firm of national reputation, to assist the RCA in refining and finalizing the restructuring. We interviewed four firms of national reputation and the Edward N. Hay Associates of Philadelphia got the job. Largely because they were experts on accountability which appealed to the committee. Then we started working with the Hay organization, and that was going to cost us \$25 or \$30,000 which was unheard of! But we went into it. I remember the Hay organization had the three top men, all with PhD's. That was another thing that we were impressed

with. Here were fellows in charge of an organizational consulting firm who had PhD's. One was a Quaker and one was a Baptist and one was a Presbyterian, and we liked that. It was sort of an "ecumenical" core. They were experts on organizational development but also on evaluation of staff to serve in the organization. Well, I remember when the Hay group came in to meet with Max De Pree and myself about how to get going, they said, "We're nonplussed. Most organizations call us in when they are in deep trouble and they don't know where to turn and they say, 'Look at us and tell us what to do.' You have already developed a very sophisticated organizational set up and we don't know what you want us to do." They said "Do you want us to, at this late stage, bless what you have done, or do you want us to have free hand to tear the thing apart and put it back together. What do you want us to do? We've never run into a group that worked for five years on their own problem with the expertise we see here and then ask us to come in. We are probably not going to earn our money." They were very frank with us. We said to them, "Look you're not supposed to bless this if you don't like it, but what we want you to do is to take it and look at it and go through the RCA and make your interviews and see whether it is acceptable to the Church, and we'll refine it and by 1967 we'd like to present it to the General Synod." (That meeting was in Bristol, Tennessee with the PCUS Church.) Well, they went to work and they spent a lot of time with this. They set up one hundred and twenty-five interviews throughout the Reformed Church with key people of the RCA. They asked the local areas to suggest who were the key people, the powerful leaders and the competent leaders. They conducted 125 interviews with their own personnel in the Reformed Church from east to west. These interviews lasted from one to two hours. Well, they wrote up all these reports and very little changes were made, very few changes. The changes that were made were for good reasons. They did an excellent job for us. And then the proposal for the one corporation with the General Program Council (GPC) of 60 members, representing the Classes, (instead of all the Boards)--that

was adopted by the General Synod. At that stage we had worked at it for six years. There was only one occasion in Holland, Michigan at the General Synod of 1966, when a theological professor got up and said, "The organization of the Church ought to be different from a business organization or a college or a seminary. And we'd like to raise some theological questions about that proposal." Max De Pree gave a short speech and he said, "The organization of the Church that we are proposing is not a theological matter. We have been dealing with the kind of needs that we have in the Reformed Church and we are aiming at effectiveness and the proper relationships to get results and we don't want any theological matters to distract us from that." When he finished, the Reformed Church said that this is the way it ought to be. In other words, they were saying that mathematics is mathematics, there are no "Christian" mathematics. The application of the mathematics may be Christian, but there is no "Christian" mathematics. Organizational matters were good in their own right. So then, in 1967, the Reformed Church approved the restructuring in principle and, in 1968, it went into effect. The Edward N. Hay Associates did two other things for us. When you have an integrated organization, how do you staff that? An organization is about as good as its staff. We had staff who had worked separately most of the time, now were expected to work together. One of the problems that came up was appointment, who shall be the General Secretary? I was up for appointment. Because I was the Stated Clerk and probably the least controversial person, I was asked to take that position. But then we had to staff all the other positions. How many of the staff do we continue and how many new staff do we get? And so the Hay group evaluated 23 of the executives at Church Headquarters. At first, they suggested that I should be exempt from this evaluation. I said no, that that would be wrong, people would always say that I wasn't evaluated. So 23 of us went through a three-day program of evaluation. We had profiles of the 23 executives, which were given only to me and to the chairman of the Committee on Staff which was Harold Schut. He was an

old classmate of mine from Central College. I must say that the Hay organization did an outstanding job. They rated the executives and said that there were about four staff that they didn't think would work out, that two of them were marginal and the rest could be used. Some of them were shifted around. One of my first duties was to try to promote, elevate or terminate four people we thought shouldn't be continued in the new organization. We did this, however, without much strain. And then every position that was filled thereafter was sent to the Hay organization in Philadelphia for an evaluation, at a cost of about two-hundred and fifty dollars. And I think it was the best money we ever spent. This Hay evaluation was only one part of the consideration. But they uncovered any personality problems or emotional problems. They would recommend a candidate as superior, average, or below average. We never employed anybody that was rated below average. We sometimes employed persons who were rated average and were delighted with a superior rating. We trusted, generally, the Hay's recommendations, which were based on thorough testing and based on all the way from vocabulary to effective relationships. Later, when we needed to adjust the salaries to the executives, the Edward N. Hay Associates were asked to do a compensation study for the RCA. The Hay organization were experts at compensation studies, with expert people on their staff. They made a compensation study for which we paid a good deal of money. Recommendations included not only what the salary range should be for all positions, but also annual performance ratings. This was long overdue. We continued to refine the salary administration.

In 1968, the GPC was formed; and if you want to know something about how that affected the Church, we can go into that a little later. We need to consider this from different angles.

STRAUCH: How did that change your position?

de VELDER: Well, I then became the General Secretary. Before, when I was

Stated Clerk, I technically had two main responsibilities; one was to be the ecumenical representative for the Reformed Church to the NCC, and the WCC, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Religion in American Life and where ever else the RCA had an ecumenical mission. We had interfaith connections for the RCA, with Roman Catholics and with Jews. I was always to be the one delegate for the RCA, but we could have additional delegates. I carried that portfolio, that was very important. Up till that time, (1961) the RCA had never had that kind of visible representation. For the next 16 years, I, as the RCA representative, was in all of those contexts, and the ecumenical organizations began to recognize the RCA in a person who had a certain style of leadership and contribution to make. And out of that came recognition for the RCA which is kind of rare, Derk, because, as some people said, the RCA had made its greatest contribution in that kind of sustained representation rather than have a different person come each time. The other responsibility was maintenance functions of the General Synod. I had to carry on all correspondence with the Classes and the Particular Synods, and get all preparations and materials made for the meeting of the General Synod, and then so all the follow-up for the General Synod. These were the main functions of the Stated Clerk. And he also represented the RCA at ceremonial occasions and anniversaries, installations and ordinations. From the listings in my biographical record you would think did I do anything else? When the GPC (in the restructure of the RCA) came into being, the position of the General Secretary was very carefully outlined. He, in fact, became the chief executive officer and the program administrator overall. And part of that restructure provided for Arie Brouwer as secretary of program in 1968. Later on, in 1970, he became the Executive Secretary, when our work realigned somewhat. But the General Secretary then became the chief administrative officer not only of the General Synod, but of the program of the RCA, with, of course, the immediate

and necessary assistance of the GPC Secretary of Program who was accountable to the General Secretary. We had a rather unique relationship, for he served the GPC and he was accountable in staff function to the General Secretary, who was also secretary to the GSEC. That was a very intriguing working relationship. I became responsible for the total staff functioning of the Reformed Church. I had responsibilities for the colleges and seminaries and the editorial committee because they were only affiliated groups. However, even for the seminaries, I was the GSEC representative to the Board of Theological Education and did that for about five years. I was always at every executive committee meeting of every board meeting, and was never excluded, although they could have excluded me for executive sessions. I reported back to the GSEC for the Board of Theological Education. So you see my responsibility was tremendously enhanced. In the course of time, when we developed more and more, I often said that the Reformed Church didn't know when a person had enough responsibilities. In 1972, when the Board of Pensions was integrated into the RCA structure and the GSEC became the Board of Pensions as a separate legal group, the Board of Pensions was phased out and the GSEC also functioned as the Board of Pensions. Without any consultation with me and with no extra salary compensation, I was also named the Executive Secretary of the Board of Pensions, not a small assignment--however, four marvelous staff people to do the work. A little later, in 1973, I was also, without any consultation, made Secretary of the Board of Direction. This was not a large assignment; but as secretary of the Board of Direction, I had to sign all the legal documents for the RCA. (Now the Board of Direction is going to be phased out and the GSEC will take over that this year.)

I can give you one example. In the United Presbyterian Church, they have the Stated Clerk, William Phelps Thompson, (Gene Carson Blake was his predecessor). The Stated Clerk of the UP Church functions in responsibility as I did when I was Stated Clerk for the Reformed Church. The UP Church also has a top program

executive. They have deliberately kept them separate, and that's the way they want it. The Stated Clerk is in charge of ecumenical relations and maintenance of their General Assembly and the Program person is in charge of all the program needs of the UP Church. Now, in the RCA the restructure pulled these two positions together for coordination. In the Reformed Church actually what happened was that they merged the Stated Clerk's office and the Program office in one person. And I think it worked splendidly, largely because Arie Brouwer came in as my recommended staff associate and worked with me for ten years. We worked closely together and he was accountable to me so that I had excellent staff support. Our arrangement intrigued the UPC and the PCUS. They didn't have that kind of structure. In my opinion if you don't have it, you can get disconnection. Also the PCUS was also always intrigued with the fact that the GSEC retained the counsel and services of the five top current presidential offices of the Reformed Church. They always said, "Once our moderator leaves office, he is finished." We keep the past presidents active for three more years as top consultants as members of the GSEC.

Our RCA structure was pretty exciting at times, a little scary. But we did a lot of innovative things and there are still a lot of things to be done. In that ten-year period, 1967-1977, we began to work out very carefully some of the things that are now coming into visibility and being applied. The structure of General Synod itself has now become what it should be -- more effective than it was before. We started that process when we appointed a committee, with Harry De Bruyn as chairman, on the Role and Function of General Synod committee.

STRAUCH: This is getting rather lengthy....

de VELDER: Oh, yes it is. We're stopping? It's 11:53, I'm tired.

SECOND INTERVIEW WITH MARION de VELDER

STRAUCH: While you were in office there was a great merger movement in the RCA. Could you give us some background on this and where the movement went?

de VELDER: Yes, I'd be glad to. Perhaps I should give some background on the ecumenical relations and the situation in the Reformed Church before we can discuss the proposed merger with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, (PCUS) or the Southern Presbyterian Church. When I came in 1961, there were in the Reformed Church a number of Committees, more or less disconnected, in the field of ecumenical and fraternal relations. There was a committee on the World Council of Churches, a delegation to the National Council of Churches, (NCC), which is not a committee but they went to the General Assembly, and a Committee on Fraternal Relations with other denominations. There also was a delegation to the Lord's Day Alliance (which had to do with the preservation of the Sabbath observance) and a Committee on Biblical Cause, which reported on the American Bible Society and other groups that were spreading the Word of God. When General Synod Executive Committee came into being it was, of course, by constitutional provision, responsible for what was called fraternal relations with other denominations. But it didn't work very much on that. In about a year, they began to take their task seriously and it was proposed that we discuss having special committee on Interchurch Relations to serve only till the Synod of 1963.

Howard Hageman, fortunately, was the chairman of that committee and the committee made quite a long report to the Synod. One of the major recommendations was that all of these committees should be pulled together and coordinated as a Permanent Committee on Interchurch Relations. I think it had fifteen members who served on a rotating long-term basis. With responsibility for all of these areas, and their responsibilities were carefully spelled out, they were to take care of naming the delegations to the various ecumenical bodies and to make proposals and recommendations about the work of all of these aspects related to fraternal or interchurch relations. So, in 1964, Howard Hageman, as chairman of the Standing Committee on Interchurch Relations, gave the report and Herman Harmelink III became the first chairman of the Interchurch Relations. And from 1963 on there was a great deal of coordination, especially in ecumenical relations, and the committee did a great amount of work in this field. Now let's look at the merger, which the main effort of the GSEC, because they were charged with all matters which pertained to Church Union. I recall that they asked Howard Hageman and myself, (Howard was then chairman of the standing committee) to interview or to meet with representatives of the United Presbyterian Church and the PCUS, to ascertain if there was any interest in talking about possible merger or union. The first meeting was held in New York City in the Interchurch Center where Eugene Carson Blake, who was Stated Clerk of the UP Church, and President James Mc Cord, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, met with Howard and myself. We talked at length. We had known each other for a long time so it was an informal gathering, and we talked about the situation. You recall, probably, that in 1960, Eugene Carson Blake, in a great sermon in San Francisco, (when the NCC was in session), proposed a Consultation on Church Unity (COCU) to enlist all the mainline denominations in the United States into a possible Church union. This was "transinterdenominational" and a rather unusual proposal. Some people were very frightened by it. But the UP Church, which was one of the charter members, had great interest in COCU, especially Eugene Carson Blake.

McCord wasn't quite as enthusiastic. We determined at the end of an hour or two that the time was not appropriate for us to engage in merger discussions with the UP Church because they wanted to pursue vigorously their relationship in the COCU.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States was not a member of COCU. But both of us had decided to send observer/consultant delegates to the COCU meetings, who had only observer status. There were overtures in 1961, and again in 1962, particularly from the Classes in the eastern section of the Church, requesting the Reformed Church to pursue positively church union or merger with other Presbyterian Church bodies. Well, a little later in that year at a meeting of the Reformed Church World Alliance, we met with several members of the PCUS delegation who were present at that meeting. And it seemed very unusual; but immediately we had a rapport and a common feeling. It seemed as if this was Providential--we both had the feeling that we should move towards one another and discuss possible merger. We reported back "very favorable" on that encounter and with all the overtures that were coming in, at the end of 1962, we began discussions with the PCUS. Then there were more overtures in 1963 and at that time the General Synod limited our conversations to the Presbyterian Church US. It was rather odd that we would narrow the channel. We were instructed to pursue merger with the PCUS alone. And since the United Presbyterian Church was very much engaged with the COCU, we began to talk to the PCUS about church union. We were both observers at COCU. The Reformed Church appointed a Committee of Twelve (laymen and ministers) and the Presbyterians appointed a Committee of Twelve. Within each denomination we were to hold the number of the committee to twelve, to form a Joint Committee of twenty-four. (There was not a woman on it).

In 1962, we began working and it was a very exciting adventure. We found that our theology was almost identical; they came from the English-Scottish background, and we, from the Dutch. We were very loyal to Calvin and they were

very loyal to Knox. Our standards of Unity were very close. We had no problems with theological matters. We did have a number of differences on social matters, and cultural backgrounds. They operated in 16 states in the south as far as Arizona, but they were not in California. They were in the south and the southeastern part of the States. The RCA operated in 26 states, mostly in the northern part of the country and in the west and on the west coast, and a few in Canada. So we discovered to our surprise that there wasn't a town in which we were both operating. We were very enthusiastic in those days, saying "if these two churches, the PCUS having about 1,000,000 members and we having about 250,000 members, could come together in church union, we would then be a church of national character." We would then be operating in approximately forty-two of the forty-eight states. We would, as a Reformed Church, have a great deal of interest in the 16 states of the south and in their institutions, (they were very strong in colleges and seminaries) and that they would then become interested in, and break out of, their southern enclave and into a national context. So there was in the Committee of Twenty-four a lot of enthusiasm and deep friendship and trust and confidence. Now of course, the constituency was not yet involved in all of this at that time. We developed a plan of union, which is all in the Archives. The plan of union was well done, I think. About the only thing that really bothered us was property. We spent much time discussing if a church on either side wanted to stay out of the union, what would happen to the property? Also there were some concerns about the ministers who decided to stay out of the merger. Would they lose their pension rights? Would they lose their ministerial status? In considering the organization of the Church, there was an interesting thing. Deacons are not important in the Presbyterian Church, but the Elders are. They have teaching elders and ruling elders. We have deacons and elders. Actually, the final plan of union eliminated the deacons. This was very much a surprise to me. Deacons are a New Testament concept, which is very important. But we

proposed a plan which even the conservatives of the Committee of Twenty-four agreed to, that we have only one office, only elders. The elders included ministers; they were teaching elders. We would have a one-class, all-important group of officers in the Church, elders or Presbyters. I don't think that had much to do with why the Plan of Union failed. The Plan of Union was voted on in 1968, and it is interesting to note that in the Presbyteries of the PCUS, they have over 70, they had a favorable vote of over three-fourths of those presbyteries. That was their requirement. Our requirement is two-thirds. We had more than a majority of classes finally voting for the plan of union, but it fell short of the two-thirds. I believe the final vote was about 60% in favor, and so it failed. So the merger was dropped because of the Reformed Church failure to ratify the Plan of Union. Why did it fail? Here of course, we have to rely on memory and judgement and we certainly will be emphasizing personal opinion.

In 1967, in Bristol, Tennessee, the General Synod met with the General Assembly of the PCUS in annual session. We had some joint sessions at which we had great inspirational speeches and a lot of eating together. Our main sessions were separate. And to our absolute surprise, in one of their sessions the PCUS voted to enter the COCU. Really without any proper consultation with us. I think they were even surprised that this passed, because their Church did not have a large majority for that at all. And I remember the follow-up negotiations that went on. What did this mean? The Reformed Church was quite sure that it could not go with them into COCU and at that time was not willing to vote. We did vote on entering COCU the next year and the vote was very close on whether to enter COCU. I recall that it lacked less than the votes for approval. I was surprised myself. We decided not to become participants in COCU but to continue to send observer/consultants. The PCUS became a full participant and member of the COCU. This action, of course, really undercut people who were working for a favorable vote on Church union. It also gave the people

who were opposed a feeling that if the PCUS decided to do this, they were really more tuned in to the UPC than to the RCA. And so, the opposition kept raising the point that if we did merge with the PCUS that within a matter of 5 years the merged RCA-PCUS Church would then soon become part of a union with the UPC. And because the UP Church had been extremely active in social issues, that gave a lot of leverage to those people who said that we should not move in the direction of merger.

The defeat of merger came to a head in the Synod of 1969 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. We had two threats at that Synod. It was a meeting that those who were present will never forget. First of all, James Foreman of the Black Determination Movement had occupied our RCA offices in the Interchurch Center, and occupied them for about three or four days while we were at the General Synod. We had to keep some staff members there to see that they didn't damage anything. Forman had already confronted the Riverside Church in New York City, nailing his demands to the door and he had occupied the NCC offices. And so he was brought to New Brunswick to the Synod meeting where he presented his demands. The Reformed Church has never been the same since. We did not accede to his demands, but we did adopt a historic statement about response to the needs of oppressed peoples. The Black Caucus and the Black Council were formed. We made long-term commitments to Black development, which is all a matter of record. The other threat was that when the merger and the Plan of Union was known to have failed, a motion came to the floor, that since we were so deeply divided over the matter of church merger, and if we couldn't decide to live together in harmony, the RCA had better separate and agree to disagree. The Western church should become independent and the eastern church so the same. This was proposed by a minister who wanted to shock the RCA into reality. He was misunderstood as being subversive, but was not. At that 1969 Synod, we faced this internal trouble and had to handle this internal threat. The internal threat was so serious that in agony together the

RCA appointed a Committee of 18, a committee on Understanding and Reconciliation, composed of very select people. For one year they were to study and to see whether the RCA could continue as a Church to the honour of God and Christ, and not to divide itself and be an offense to the unity of the Church.

During that year, I myself had one of the best experiences of my 16 years. From January to May of 1970 I went as General Secretary through the whole church, section by section and area by area, to meet with all kinds and groups of people who met and tried to discuss what were the problems that we needed to address with one another. An interesting part about those meetings was that these lasted generally about two hours. There was no prepared agenda whatsoever. Generally, I had a member of the GSEC with me, and/or my wife Edith. These meetings were during five months, from January to May. As I recall there were over four-thousand people who attended these meetings and there were over eighty separate meetings. After I made an introductory statement at these meetings, we passed out three by five cards on which they could write any questions, statements or observations that they wished. Then these cards were gathered and the subjects became the agenda for the meeting. I usually asked two or three people to collate the cards. Within a matter of fifteen minutes or so, we had before the meeting all of the items of real concern. Our strategy was that, if a person didn't want to stand up and speak, he would at least be willing and able to write something down on a card. All of these cards were unsigned. And so the real issues came forth. Then we discussed the concerns, aware that there was probably no complete answer to the concerns. But we would talk about how we felt. I would try to interpret from what I know as a representative of the GSEC and the Interchurch Relations Committee. All these discussions were tremendously important. At the end of the 5 months, I wrote a report about 14 or 15 areas of concern for consideration by the GSEC and the General Synod. At the 1970 General Synod the committee on Understanding and Reconciliation reported that they had worked very

hard and that there had been a great deal of tension within that committee. At the end, though, they were strongly agreed that the RCA had to stay together. That report was overwhelmingly received and approved.

In April of 1970 we had the Festival of Evangelism in Detroit, which brought almost 3,000 RCA members together. When such a festival was proposed, we thought how many people are going to come to such a thing? It was called the Festival of Evangelism to give it a spiritual tone. It proved to be a great event. There were actually 2,300 or more people registered, paid delegates, and then of course, many area people came also. Some of the meetings ran about 3,000 to 4,000 people. The interesting thing was that one-third of the delegates were young people under the age of 25. So it was a tremendous participation of the youth, almost completely unexpected. The festival brought the people together and they became aware that they were diverse, yet they all could relate and accept one another. The well known Black leader, Tom Skinner gave a final speech that lasted about an hour and a half. He just absolutely brought everyone to their feet. The festival ended with 500 or 600 people carrying a wooden cross (which had been on the podium) through the streets of Detroit around Cobo Hall, which was unheard of in the RCA. Following that festival we had a Consultation on Missions in 1971 and later (1972) we had a Family Festival in Estes Park, Colorado. That last one followed a few years later, (1976) the Jubilee in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. Through these Festival experiences the Church learned to live in diversity and in the last years I've never heard anyone say that the RCA can't hold together. One of the miracles in the RCA (as I stated at the 350th Anniversary) was that this old bird is so tough that it has always held together and never split apart. We have now learned that we're diverse, but we are willing to accept each other. I think that the last General Synod was proof of that, that we can deal with either matters like the ordination of women and the WCC grant to combat racism and come out without too many unhappy people.

STRAUCH: Did the Church merger movement then die in the RCA?

de VELDER: After Church merger failed in 1969, we have not moved towards any other merger consideration since. Of course, when it failed, we turned to our internal problems and dealt with them quite effectively, I think. We've continued to send observers to the COCU, and Commission on Christian Unity had learned a lot from this experience.

We have been doing a lot of work and discussion with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) our "kissing cousins" so to speak. We parted over some issues in the late 1800's and those issues are really not very important anymore. We now work together on a number of things. We work together in the youth area, we have a number of institutions that help the retarded children. The Christian Reformed Church, with our participation, developed a rather outstanding church school curriculum which is called the "Bible Way." It's for the younger, elementary grades. And this is being used by almost 400 churches in the RCA, almost 50% of all our Churches. Then, of course, we are also in the Joint Educational Development (JED) where congregations are assisted to develop their own curriculum, drawing on resources that are available to them. And that's moving right along. We have good relations with the CRC with joint committees working numerous projects. While they are more conservative than we are, and probably a generation behind in trying to meet the secular America, our formal theology is almost identical. In fact, our creeds are exactly the same, and there are very few distinctions of any consequences between the RCA and the CRC. They do (through independent societies) maintain their own schools and this makes them a very cohesive group so that they retain their members in this kind of situation.

I don't know when the time will come for the RCA to again think of merger with any other group. One of our problems is our size, we are rather small. And if we move towards any of the larger mainline denominations we would, as the opponents kept saying, "get swallowed up!" But someone observed that if the

RCA were swallowed up by any other group they would get a bad case of indigestion.

(laughter)

STRAUCH: We've got a very big mouth for such a very small Church!

de VELDER: It would be like the whale swallowing Jonah. Jonah wasn't very large either, but the whale couldn't hold him! (laughter)

STRAUCH: What effect did the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the North American Alliance have on the RCA?

de VELDER: Well, the RCA was a charter member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (the complete title is "the World Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the world holding the Presbyterian System"), in 1970 was joined by the Congregational Church, and it is now the World Alliance of Reformed and Congregational Churches. That's the oldest ecumenical group of which we are a member, because they are over 100 years old. Mrs. de Velder and I were present at St. Andrew's, Scotland, in 1977, for the Centennial Consultation. The World Alliance is a rather small group. It has a lot of Reformed and Congregational Churches in it from many, many countries. It has done a lot of good theological work but doesn't engage in any program, except some small relief work. It is a wonderful group, but it's having some difficulty now because all confessional groups are being questioned and challenged to discontinue and move into the World Council Organization.

In 1928, the RCA became members of the WCC of which we are charter members. And we have related to and participated in these ecumenical organizations and it's really unthinkable to me that we would leave either the WCC or the NCC or the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. This has been a tremendous relationship.

I attended the WCC General Assembly in Evanston, Illinois in 1954 when I was pastor at Hope Church. And later I attended two other General Assemblies. I missed the one in 1961 in New Delhi because I had just become Stated Clerk. I was entitled to go but I wanted to orient myself in the office and I felt that I was needed in the office to learn my job. Two other RCA delegates went. The WCC meets

every seven years. I attended in Uppsala in 1968 and in Nairobi in 1975. (That meeting was supposed to be in Jakarta, Indonesia, but because of the political situation at that time, it was held in Nairobi). In Nairobi I was elected a member of the Central Committee of the WCC which is a group of about 130. It is really the guiding force of the WCC. When I retired in 1977, I resigned that position with the understanding that Arie Brouwer, my successor as General Secretary, take that seat. He has now attended one meeting of the Central Committee in Jamaica. That has been a very good experience for him and the RCA will be represented in the Central Committee.

I attended a meeting in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1964, of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches General Council and one in Nairobi in 1970.

The National Council of Churches (NCC) holds General Assemblies every three years. I went to every one of those during my 16 years, in Philadelphia, in Miami, in Detroit, and in Dallas.

All these assemblies were, from my perspective, one of the most exciting parts of the work of the General Secretary. Being the RCA representative in the ecumenical relations brings one into contact with world leaders in the Christian Church. It really has been a wonderful experience. When I retired from my position, the Reformed Church through the chairperson of GSEC sent out an invitation to my ecumenical colleagues asking if they would like to write a letter on the occasion of my retirement on anything they wished to say. And to my surprise so many letters came in that I have a volume of letters about two inches thick of people who wrote from outside of the Reformed Church in America. I think it is interesting to note that before 1961, the Reformed Church sent various people to ecumenical meetings and there was always a succession of different persons. I became the visible representative of the RCA to all of these meetings and people began to recognize the RCA in the person of the General Secretary. This is extremely valuable. The RCA was able to make contributions far beyond anything

that we had done before. It was a great responsibility to interpret where the Reformed Church stood on various issues. Some people thought that that wasn't well done, but I think the majority were satisfied with me representing the Church through that period of time.

I also served as an officer in a number of these ecumenical contexts. I was the Recording Secretary of the NCC, for a three year period (1966-69), which was a very hectic time when everything broke loose. For ten years I was chairman for the NCC Committee on Administration and Finance, in which we handled the responsibilities for the last several years of over \$30,000,000 of assets. We reported to each meeting of the Governing Board, 3 times a year, I had a great experience with that committee and I learned a lot from that experience. In the WCC they have a United States conference. I was vice-chairman of that for a number of years and I was also secretary for a number of years. So I did have numerous places where I could make some contributions. This was a bit unusual because I came from a very small denomination. One of the added features was that at most of the meetings, my wife was able to accompany me. She became known as a representative of the RCA although she was in an unofficial capacity.

STRAUCH: You were also able to meet with three of our Presidents. Do you have any stories about that experience?

de VELDER: Yes, I think it was most interesting. In 1963, President Kennedy began to take seriously his leadership role as far as civil rights were concerned. I recall at the General Synod meeting in Pella, (I had been in office only two years) while the synod was in session, a telegram came from the President inviting two-hundred and forty religious leaders representing the various denominations, and other religious leaders to the White House for a consultation on support for civil rights. When that telegram was presented to the General Synod, and a motion was passed that the Stated Clerk should attend that meeting on

behalf of the RCA, a number of people opposed it and spoke in opposition. Their point was that we should not cooperate in that movement only, but that it would not be proper for the Stated Clerk to go to a meeting of government. There were only a few such voices. So, I went to that meeting in the White House. There was a great deal of screening to get in, the security was very high. I recall the meeting in the East Room where President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, who was attorney general at that time, the "Kennedy Boys" met with us. Present were 240 interfaith representatives, Jewish and Catholic and Protestant leaders. At that time, Carl Mc Intyre published in his Christian Beacon the names of all the 240 delegates who had gone to the White House, at the invitation of the President, as subversives. You can look up that copy in the Archives and see my name prominently displayed in this group who were being taken in by John F. Kennedy! An interesting thing happened. John F. Kennedy was an impressive person. He got up and spoke, very charming, with great sincerity and innate ability to communicate. He told us that we were the important leaders who would make the difference. Then he introduced his brother, Robert Kennedy, saying, "Some people feel that I should not have appointed him, but he's been able to carry on the work. And Robert will give you all of the details of how we propose to work, and how the administration proposed to work in support of civil rights." He left the podium and Robert came up to speak. Something was missing, (laughing) because Robert Kennedy looked at the podium, and got a blank stare on his face and said, "My brother had carried off all my notes, I am unable to speak." John Kennedy ran over and gave him back his notes! Well, it was a very interesting and historic meeting. Later on, John Kennedy made a public statement that without the support of the Church leaders the Civil Rights Act would not have been passed. I think he was right. The NCC, I think, rose to its finest hour by its vigorous support of the civil rights movement. I was proud of being part of the NCC and to be there for the RCA. So much for the meeting with President Kennedy.

Later on, I had been involved in Religion in American Life and had been appointed to it by the Advertising Council in America (which is the large advertising group for all the public service vehicles like the Red Cross and all of those great causes) as a member on the Public Policy Committee. During that time, in 1972, I was invited to come to Washington to their annual meeting. Part of that annual meeting was a visit to the White House when Richard M. Nixon was president. President Nixon seemed rather distracted at that time, and he was meeting with the Shah of Iran, I believe, the next day. So, because of this commitment, he spent a very short time with us. There were 216 participants and I was the only minister in the group. During the sessions we were briefed by all of the top administration officials. In the White House, Nixon gave a rather fearful speech. He was concerned that welfare and rise in Social Security benefits were going to raise the inflation too much. Senior Citizens, he said, were demanding too much of the government and the labor unions were going to sabotage the government. He sort of set himself up at the time as the defender of the American way of life. He appealed to all these people skilled in the art of communication as the persons to help him to keep things under control. He deplored the people who were protesting and dissenting from what he intended to do. My wife and I were very much concerned and talked most of the way back from Washington, feeling that there was something wrong going on in Washington. Later on we discovered, of course, that Watergate was the result of all this. So that was not a pleasant experience. We were given free access to the White House, we could go any place except the personal living quarters. The Marine Band played and the reception was absolutely the ultimate. Many young people in their special uniforms were serving. The food was lavish. One of the disappointments was that Nixon had told us in the East Room (where he addressed us) that he would have to meet with the Shah but that his wife, Pat, would greet us. So we went through the reception line. Pat was very gracious. When Mrs. de Velder and I came through I greeted her and told her that Norman and Ruth Peale wanted to extend their love and greetings to them. And she got very excited because, as you know,

Norman Peale had married their daughter in the Marble Collegiate Church. Now, of course, the Nixons gave anyone who were friends of the Peales special treatment. So we did get a few "moments of glory" with Pat Nixon.

The third visit to the White House was in 1975 when Gerald Ford was president. He invited the NCC "heads of communions" to come to a meeting with him. He had scheduled about forty-five minutes with us. The focus was largely on what can the US do for world hunger. Opponents in the Congress were trying to cut down all foreign aid of that kind. Well, he stayed with us for an hour and a half. It's unusual for a president to schedule 45 minutes and then stay an hour and a half. We were around a table, about 30 of us, and I sat about 4 people removed from Jerry Ford. I had known him in Western Michigan for about 20 years, and had met with him quite frequently so that we were actually on a first name basis, but of course, he could not express this. When he left the meeting, he shook hands with me as he left. That was a great thrill. Out of that meeting a much larger commitment of funds for world hunger came about than expected. He also asked for input from the NCC on any issue that we wished to raise. That was a new idea, because Johnson and Nixon had not invited delegates from the NCC to the White House. This was a new departure. Jerry Ford did this probably because he is a devout Episcopalian, and he was very much interested in what the religious community thinks.

Such experiences come only once in a lifetime. How does it feel to shake hands with three presidents? (laughing) This is a little bonus that you never expect. In the time with Religion in American Life, I was also able to meet quite a number of leaders, Hubert Humphrey, John Connally, Mark Hatfield and Nelson Rockefeller, and John Lindsey and some of the other men who were honored to speak at the Waldorf Astoria at the annual dinner of Religion in American Life. In 1964-65, I was chairman of the Board of the RIAL and was a member of that Board of Direction for 16 years, and for 4 of them a member of the Public Policy Committee.

STRAUCH: This tape is going to run out in a few minutes. Do you have any closing statements?

de VELDER: Well, I think that the future of the RCA is solid and promising. The General Synod met in Holland, Michigan here in June (1979). I covered the 5 day sessions in 5 articles that I wrote for the Holland Sentinel. I wrote that, of the 28 Synod meetings that I have attended, this is one of our best. I felt that the RCA had been able to meet the issues and to resolve them. Probably not to the satisfaction of all, but they did not avoid making the hard decisions. The RCA is a vigorous group and they have just recently engaged in a program on Church growth. They secured the funds to do that and this is a promising sign. One of the problems that the Reformed Church will meet is to face what in the long run is the future of the denomination. It does not seem to be able to grow past the 200,000 member mark. This is one of the smallest of the "tribes of Israel." It is a vigorous group because it has lasted since 1628, and so it is over 350 years old. It has a lot of toughness and ability to stay around. As someone said at the 350th anniversary meeting, it's a miracle that the RCA is still in existence, the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuous history in the United States. When you think of the way that society is moving and integrating and the world is becoming smaller and smaller, what difference can a denomination of 200,000 plus make in the world? This is a real concern. Where do you go? We found that a number of other small denominations are in the same kind of situation. What lies in our future? There were times, of course, when we tried three efforts to unite with other Presbyterian groups. All three of them failed. But the RCA believes in cooperation, we've been a cooperative group and a communicative group. We have not been isolationists. And there are many things that can be done effectively by cooperation.

But someday we have got to come together with other Christian groups to unite in the visible Church of Jesus Christ. When people have been very hard on me about the fact that I insist on that, I ask them the counter-question: on what basis can

we continue in over 250 denominations? Can we continue them indefinitely? For example, in the field of education we don't have many little country schools any more, like they had in Iowa when I was a boy. We have larger units that are more efficient and they work better. When it comes to the field of religion, such deep feelings are involved, that we as Protestants feel that whenever we have a legitimate reason to separate ourselves from one another, we do. I am still hoping that the Body of Christ can and will be a visible symbol to the world and not be as fragmented as we are today. So the future of the Reformed Church in America appears strong. We continue and we have resiliency and staying power. But the question is: can the RCA in the next 10 to 20 years hold its own as a small group and grow, not only in terms of members, but also in terms of program? I imagine that in the next 5 to 10 years there will be some kind of consideration of and another movement toward another merger or union. Where this will come, I don't know. Logically, it would seem that the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church ought to put their own houses in order and move toward one another. People always smile about that and say, "Cousins and brothers and sisters ought to get along, but often prefer to relate to some people outside of their own group." But I am very grateful that the RCA has always maintained its membership in the large confessional and World Christian bodies. As long as it does, it will continually have the perspective and the correctives of the larger, total Body of Christ for its own life and witness.

STRAUCH: Thank you for the interview...

de VELDER: AMEN!

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