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## Gray, Eric Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with  
Eric Gray

(unedited)

Conducted December 3, 1996  
by James Palmer

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
Interview with Eric Gray  
Interviewer: James Palmer  
December 3, 1996

JP: Eric, when were you born?

EG: [date removed], 1953.

JP: Where were you born?

EG: Cook County, City of Chicago.

JP: When did you come to Holland?

EG: For the first time? 1990, officially. I went to Teen Challenge Muskegon in '87, but I wouldn't consider that Holland. I've never been to Holland. The Greyhound bus goes around Holland or through Holland or something. So 1990, January.

JP: So that's when you moved up here?

EG: Right.

JP: Tell me a little bit about your family.

EG: Extended family? My mom and stuff? My real father, my blood father, I never knew. The guy I grew up knowing as my dad is an alcoholic. I don't even know if he's still alive. My mom... beautiful, gorgeous woman. I look like her. She's still living in Chicago. She's been married twice since I was 8 years old. I have two sisters younger than me. I'm not the oldest boy, I've got an older brother, who was raised outside of the home, and I've got one stepbrother and one stepsister.

JP: How about your family right now, your current family. You're single right? Talk a little about your marriage.

EG: I'm engaged to marry a very beautiful young lady on February 8th. She has a 5 year old daughter named Chelsea. Her name is Dawn and I'm very excited about this. This will be my third marriage. I got married when I was 17 years old, fresh out of high school, and then I got married again fresh out of Teen Challenge, I got married in 1989, and that marriage lasted officially 3 years. So this will be my third time around and hopefully my last. It will be the last, I told God this is forever.

JP: Talk about some organizations you've been involved in, in Holland.

EG: Well, what I've done, I'm going to start currently and work back and bounce around. I'm currently the director of Holland Teen Ministries, which is a relational mentoring ministry and works primarily, but not exclusively, with the public school system. I will work as assistant to faculty and staff, mentoring, mediation, tutoring, crisis management, crisis intervention. I'm also co-paster of Maple Avenue Ministry, which is multi-cultural core city ministry, and it has been the vision of that particular ministry to embrace and represent the diversity in the community that it serves.

I'm currently a member of the Police Community Relations Commission. I'm commissioned on the board. I've been on the organization for 3 years now. This will probably be my last year.

I've been involved with the Youth and Family Task Force, which was a work started by the city during the heyday of the gang situation, to address youth and family violence. I don't know if it's still in existence, but I was involved in that for a year. I'm a part of the Substance Abuse Committee with the Board of Education. I was executive board member of the Young Calvins Federation for a year. I had to

step down and resign from that. I've been involved with different levels of youth ministry within the Holland area. I was on the executive planning committee of \_\_\_\_\_ . I've promoted two youth rallies here in the Holland area. So, I've been on a slew of different organizations and committees involved with issues surrounding youth.

I was involved with the implementation and planning for what is called the Afro-American Support Group, which deals with helping young Black Americans, Afro-Americans who have moved into this community, and help them adjust, make them feel welcome and embraced, and to address issues. It's like an advocacy group at times, concerning Afro-Americans in this community. So, I've been involved with a plethora of different things in this community.

JP: What brought you to Holland? What organization...?

EG: No, desperation, more or less. When I graduated Teen Challenge in 1988, God delivered me from a 17 year substance abuse addiction. I went back to Chicago and I lived there, went right back in the same neighborhood of which I came out of, which proved to be detrimental because I really was not strong enough to practice the things that I'd been taught and walk in my deliverance. I wound up backsliding and getting back into drugs after 19 months of being clean. I got into a situation where my life was in danger. I contacted some associates who had settled here in the Holland area via a pastor on the north side. These individuals were from different areas, from Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, Washington D.C., who went through the Teen Challenge vehicle and were not going back to their particular neighborhoods like

I did. They had settled here. I contacted them, and they came and got me, January 29, 1988. So in desperation and God brought me here.

JP: What was the first thing you did when you got here?

EG: The first thing I did was get back into Teen Challenge for 5 weeks. They have what is called the re-entry program where you go in and get debriefed and rebriefed and dusted off and sent back out into society. After that 5 weeks in Muskegon, I moved back here to Holland. My wife at that time came up with me. She got settled here on the north side and I got a job at Bil-Mar Foods, you know, the turkey people, and just began to establish a life.

The church that I was attending on the north side did not have a youth ministry, and I had a 12 year old daughter at the time. I saw that there was a lot of ministry for adults, you know, the parents: bible study, sunday school and all that. But there was not much going on for the youth. They were coming to church on Wednesday with the adults, they had to sit through adult bible study or go in the back and play, and I didn't think that was good for my 12 year old. I wanted her to learn just as much as I was learning. Maybe not the same thing, but learn something. I went to the pastor and asked him, "Hey Paster, can you develop some kind of youth ministry," and he looked at me and he said, "You do it." I told him to go fly a kite. I didn't think that was for me. I say this in all honesty, I mean it in every sense of the word, literally. I actually had an ego as big as this room, where I felt that God had called me to ministry and I felt that right away I would be ministering to thousands. At that time Jimmy Swaggert and Jimmy Baker were in the pinnacle of

their ministry careers, and they were looked upon as being examples of ministry, and that's where I wanted to be right away. So when he said youth ministry, I said that's not what I had intended, and it turned out that was not God's vision, that was my ambition. So a couple of weeks went by and I came to him again and he said, "Eric, you've got a heart for this kind of thing. If you really want it done, then you do it because there is nobody here to do it." So I said okay, and that's how I got tricked into doing youth ministry. Because I went home and I was like, God, I don't want to have anything to do with young people. I called them knuckleheads, at the time, because they dressed different, they talked different. I mean, that was a weird generation. I didn't know anything about those people. Most of my teenage life was spent in isolation, seclusion. Then, at the age of 17 after I got married and entertained substance abuse for 17 years. I was not really living. You know what I'm saying. So I didn't know anything about life. I find that a lot of my experiences and my background is what I use in ministries.

JP: What are some of the biggest changes that you've seen in Holland over the last so many years that you've been here?

EG: Wow! Well, I've seen an awakening, a community... like coming out of hibernation. Okay? This community, which is primarily Dutch, which was settled under the Dutch tradition by Dutch descendants, the Dutch are a very close-knit closed type of community. The Dutch, from my experience with the Dutch community, they have difficulty with the outside, with newcomers and things of that nature. In 1992, when the gang incidents came up, there were three of us that were instrumental. We

actually exposed the gang situation in Holland. Being from Chicago, graffiti was something I was accustomed to, but coming into Holland, this Peyton Place type of atmosphere and environment, as far as I was concerned, I didn't even lock my doors for a long time. I still haven't become accustomed to locking my doors. But when I was promoting a youth rally in 1992 I was doing promotion work in the poor city, I started seeing a lot of graffiti, a large amount. And it scared me that this community was becoming something all of a sudden real quick, something that I was coming out of, and I didn't want to see it. So I did a lot of gang awareness seminars in the area, whereas people from Chicago were more familiar and informed about the gang situation and workings of gangs, I was around gangs but I never was in one. So I brought these individuals to do these seminars and stuff and the community didn't want to accept it right off. They didn't want to believe that they had a gang problem. "Not my community. This can't happen here." So there was a lot of resistance to this exposure, this reality. Little Joe. It wasn't really embraced until it became a problem that had to be dealt with, until the young man was stabbed here in Washington Square. Then it became an issue that this is something that needed to be dealt with. And so, in working with that and seeing this community come forward to address that issue, a lot of issues came to surface. Such as maybe not racism, but racial bias, racial ignorance, I don't call it racism, but racial ignorance. There is a level of racism everywhere, but there's more racial ignorance here than anything else. That began to surface. The economic development situation, the whole Holland being one of the cities that has the lowest unemployment rate of individuals coming here



from different areas with no affordable housing. That issue was dealt with, so I began to see the community change. I began to see people wanting to address these issues that were, in the past, either shoved under the rug or never experienced, such as the gang situation and drugs. This community never had to deal with these situations, even though those situations may have been here to some degree, but now they were dealing with it. Also this community was a community that was dealing with it but didn't know how. So at first there was a lot of opposition to bringing in outside help. Then all of a sudden the bubble burst and people began bringing in outside help. So that begins to bring in outside influences. So I began to see the community change more in that degree.

I've seen the community change in regards to not only cultural awareness but the need for embracing different cultures and the need for learning about different cultures and the interacting of different cultures. In other words, we are all going to live here, period. There's no two ways about it, and we need to learn how to get along, not me conform to you because I'm black and you're white, but we need to learn how to get along with one another based on where we are. Not only that, but I need to learn who you are and what makes you tick and you need to learn who I am and what makes me tick, and not based on misspeaks or media hype or something you learned from your ancestors. You know what I'm saying? Because I've seen a lot of that happen, a lot of cultural diversity awareness in corporations and school systems and levels of government, I've seen the change in the atmosphere of the police. I've seen nothing but good changes. The spiritual aspect of this community has changed a

lot. I've seen it going from being religiously rich but spiritually dead, to a spiritually awakening community. There's more that the church needs to do, and we want to learn how to do it. Those kind of changes.

JP: Would you say most of the changes since you've been here have been for the better. Holland is a better place now?

EG: All of them have been for the better. The only thing that I have not seen change, which to me has been not necessarily for the bad, it just hasn't been for the good at all, is the lack of affordable housing in this community. At Holland Teen Ministries, we've had to deal with families of teens that we work with, who have been in this area for a period of time, but because of lack of affordable housing, they have to live in hotels or motels. They come here for better jobs, they get a better job through the temporary agencies, which I think is slave labor, and they can't get a down payment deposit to put on a home because they are constantly putting that money to staying in a hotel. Then the agencies and resources that are available to give these individuals help with a deposit, they have guidelines. For instance, Community Action House would not help with a deposit unless a person is a resident for 90 days. How's a person supposed to be a resident if they can't get a place to stay? So I haven't seen enough addressing that issue. There's still a lot of unfairness and discrimination in the community among the Hispanics and Afro-Americans and, I would even guess, with the Asians. I don't have much connection with the Asian population, but I would probably have to say that there is a level of discrimination still going on.

JP: What was your first impression when you got here of the Holland area?

EG: I had two. The first one was I was glad to be here. The first two weeks I was here I didn't even think they had a police force, because I didn't hear sirens. In the city, man, you hear sirens every five seconds, glass being broken, you know, people swearing, loud voices, you know, sirens going off. For two weeks, man, I didn't even hear a siren. I was like, what's happening here? Then I found out I was living in Holland Township and nothing happened out there anyway. That was the first thing, it was a beautiful place to be, it was a safe place to raise a family, it was a good place to be compared to the inner city.

The other thing was, I thought it was the weirdest place in the world because around May and during Tulip Time, I saw all these people running around in these funny little costumes and wooden shoes. I'm like, you know, we're no longer in Kansas Toto type of a thing. I thought I was from a different planet. I'm serious man, I had never seen anything like that in my life. You know, being from Chicago, around St. Pat's day, they paint the river green and everybody gets dressed up in green. That was a normal thing. I grew up with that. Even though it may be weird to some people, I grew up with that, I was used to that. But I was not used to the Tulip thing and the Tulip Festival and Dutch costumes. I'm not used to that, so when I saw it I freaked out and said, "Whoa, what is this?" So those are the first two things that I noticed. Another thing I noticed was how openly warm the people seemed to be, appeared to be. When I first got here, you go to the mall or to Meijers, people would speak to you. They would say hello to you. I don't know if that's still going on now. All right? I don't know if that warmth is still going on.

It's hard for me to detect that, because I'm so well known in this community, people speak to me that I don't even know, because of my face, or they know me from somewhere, me speaking somewhere. So I don't know, you'd have to talk to someone else about that warmth. But that was one of the first things, my wife at the time, that's the first thing she said, "It's so warm here, people are speaking to me that I don't even know." It was the first weeks that we moved here.

JP: We already touched on this a little bit. What were some negative aspects of Holland, some drawbacks to living here?

EG: As I said, the level of discrimination is still going on. Unfairness. For instance, when I speak on racism at Grand Valley or Hope College I always bring this up: as well known as I am in this community, I can walk into J. C. Penney with a nice two piece suit on, and I would still draw attention, negative attention. Why? Because I'm black. Period. That's all. Because I'm black. That's a negative. I can deal with that because I know who I am in Christ, but you take a person who is coming from an oppressed situation, their esteem is down, they have no esteem, and they are just angry at the world. The first thing they're going to see is that's you're being a racist. They are not used to it, can't deal with that. I can go in restaurants, and I went in a restaurant, I will speak on this on record... Ben Patterson and I went to lunch one day and we went to the Alpenrose. The hostess came and waited on him, spoke to him, seated him. The waitress came and waited on him. Other people would come around and say, "Is everything OK?" They came and talked to him. As soon as we walked into the main part of the restaurant, the atmosphere of the restaurant changed.

When we left there I said, "Ben did you notice?" He said, "Yeah, I noticed, I didn't know if you did." I said, "Ben, I notice it everywhere I go." We talked about that. It wasn't because they didn't like me around. It was because they weren't used to or didn't know how to deal with me. Okay? They didn't know how to talk to me, you know. It's not that they were being racist, they didn't know what to do with me. A lot of that is still going on in this community.

And then the other thing is the lack of affordable housing. People are leaving impoverished situations, having to come here, and still, because of lack of affordable housing, they wind up living below poverty. Now, that's the statement that people in Holland will look shocked at: there are people in this community, right now today, living below the poverty level, and we have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation. I'm not saying it's Holland's fault or the people's fault, but something is wrong with that picture. We're one of the most financially, economically developed communities around. I go back to Chicago and tell folks you can make \$7.50-\$8.50 an hour at McDonald's, and they look at me like I'm crazy. No joke man. \$7.50-\$8.50 an hour in Chicago is a lot of money. Here that's normal. You couldn't live comfortably on \$8.50 an hour raising a family. It would be hard for you to do that as a single individual looking at the level of rent here in this area. It is unbelievable. I don't think we're looking at that problem. Not enough. I mean, we're looking at it but nothing is being done. We're constantly doing land developments and building condos and so forth. We could use a lot of that land to build some places where these people can stay and not ghetto type stuff, you know, which I think is a slap in

the face to any minority, whether they are white, I call the whites who are living below the poverty line a minority because the majority of whites don't even accept them as being part of their race. That may not cross the board with everybody, but some whites feel that way. But those are the main ones.

JP: Let's talk about the church, and not necessarily this church, but the church in Holland in general. How has it changed, where is it right now, how does it fit into the community?

EG: Well, again, I would have to put where the church is now compared to five, six, seven years ago. When I say the church, I think I'm basically looking at CRC, RCA, because that's the majority in this community. All white, upper middle class, Dutch. Me, black--I'm thinking 1990-91--I don't feel comfortable, I'm not accepted, I'm looked at strange, I don't belong. There was little or no outreach. It was absent. I called them 9 to 5 churches. What that means is, in Chicago, you take your clothes to the cleaners. If you get your clothes there by nine o'clock, you can get them by five. That's called in by nine, out by five. They're quick. Here, eleven o'clock, some of the biggest churches I've ever seen--I've seen a lot of big churches, but not a whole bunch of big churches--some of the biggest churches I've ever seen, parking lots full of nice cars, late model cars, at eleven o'clock. At 12:05, those parking lots are empty. As far as I'm concerned, they're spiritually dead. There were pastors who were reprimanded or even fired if they were accustomed to going over the certain time line of preaching: "this is what we're accustomed to, you don't do it here." I saw a very unfriendly church, a very closed church, a very divided church,

and to some degree, a very secular church when I first came here in 1990, 1991. Now that is changing. People are addressing the multi-cultural issue. How can we minister to other races and cultures? How can we do ministry in the community. The church is beginning to realize its purpose, that it's just not a social club, it doesn't belong to anybody, it's not the country club mentality. It doesn't belong to anybody, it doesn't belong to any board, it doesn't belong to you because you've been going to this church for four years, it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to God. And people are beginning to see that. I believe it's nothing we're doing, it's just the spirit of God. Because I'm studying social welfare at Hope College, one of the things that I realized, along with my study of the Bible, the first social welfare system began with the mass, when Peter came out of the upper room and folks wanted to know why he was just suddenly speaking the \_\_\_\_\_, and he explained why he was talking in this other tongue, and he simply gave a description of his life with Christ. Just from that testimony, 3,000 people were saved. I don't even understand that. They didn't have microphones back in those days, either Peter had a big mouth, or there was something going on that surpasses our imagination. But Peter, here's Peter who denied Christ three times, suddenly had this miracle poured upon him, and faced with this 3,000 member church. He don't know what to do. He's still trying to understand what's going on with his life. The first thing he did, one of the first acts he did, was to have people who had stuff, sell their possessions, or then they would bring it into the store house, bring it into the ----, so they could tend to what Peter saw. First of all, there was a lot of poor and needy. He said, that should not be.

The first thing, let's do what Christ would do. Sell everything you got, bring it in, so we can take it in to the people. The first social welfare system. Since that time, the welfare system, the church pushed it out of the ---, because they began to have to deal with people that were beneath them, as they feared, the poor and needy, and gave it to the government. Now the government is getting rid of it, so the church has to take it on. So the church is beginning to change. It's beginning to address the issue of social welfare, developing homelessness ministry, how do we do that? How do we develop community? One of the things that we have noticed in our ministry is that the community, the state, the city, the nation, is a direct reflection of the state of the church. Throughout church history, where there are strong churches, the community is strong, the government is strong. When the churches fall, the government falls, gets corrupt. The community fails, the city, everything fails. What we're seeing in America, as far as I'm concerned, is a direct reflection of the state of the church. What we're seeing in Holland, over the last couple of years, the manifestations of gangs, drugs, violence, community unrest, is a direct reflection of the state of the church. We have strong church communities. We have strong church families, traditions. But we don't have strong churches that are ministering the gospel of Jesus Christ, and there's still the morality. The word church, if you study it out, means legislative body, it is the governing body which administers, distributes, and oversees the laws, the legislation, of God. We administer the laws of God, we oversee the laws of God. We have not done that, and in this community, that's what you've been seeing. So the church is beginning to see that and address some issues.



It's our job to instill and do stability in this community. It's not the government's job, it's not Weed & Seed, it's not the police department, it's not the boys and girls club, it's the church's job to instill and institute stability in this community, and structure. Unless we do it, it won't be done to a point where it's going to be stabilized. It's not going to be long lasting. Somewhere there's going to be corruption, it's going to falter. So I've been seeing a lot of changes. I've been seeing the spirituality change. I've been seeing the whole issue of race change. I've been seeing the whole mind set of, if you're not Dutch you're not much, in the church change. The whole country club mentality--people aren't dressing... So I've seen the church change. Man, I'm excited about what's going on in the church, in the body of Christ. I've been seeing the denominational divisions, the denominational differences, people are addressing those issues. How can we come together? Do we have to be so blatant about what we believe and our theories on our theologies? They don't mean that. What's the central theme here? People need ministry. I've seen people come together across those barriers. I've seen the young people change from a dead generation, an ostracized generation in the churches in 91-92, to become a revitalized generation. This is our church, we want to belong, we want to do something. We just don't want to be... this inherited salvation is a facade, it's a myth, it doesn't exist. We have to have salvation for ourselves and we want this thing not on the cloaks and shadows of our parents and our ancestors, but this is ours. I've been starting to see the change. I kind of got into preaching a little bit, Jim. I'm sorry.

JP: It's OK. I probably need it. Has there ever been any controversy?

EG: (laughs) Oh, man. Well, I say the greatest controversy that I can remember in Holland, when we were in the heyday of the change, God was implementing change in this community. We were dealing with the gang situation, we were dealing with the race situation, the culture situation, we were dealing with the environment, we were dealing with all kinds of stuff. There was a plethora of things going on and there was a lot of confusion going on. The Holland High School principal was leaving. He was resigning and taking on a position as superintendent of Zeeland. That put the school system in the position of finding another principal. One or two individuals in the school system applied for the job. One of them was a current administrator, who had applied several times in years back, and had been denied. There was a petition filed by the teachers, some of the staff of this school, who did not want this certain administrator even to get this position. So there was a national search. There was two search committees, A and B search committees, to do a national search, to interview candidates who had submitted applications. They got down to two. These two search committees were then supposed to bring a candidate from each of their committees, and then make their recommendation to the board of education. They made the recommendation so that it came down to two. They selected one, made a recommendation to the board of education, and it was shot down. It just so happens, nobody knew the color, race, age, nothing of these candidates. It was not revealed. But somehow it leaked out that the candidate that was being recommended was black. There was only two, as I said. The other one,

that was not going to be highly recommended, was white. He was the administrator that the staff at Holland High School petitioned not to have. But because this guy was black, the community came against the recommendation, and it was shot down, and the principal that was originally opposed, was put into that position. That created controversy. That individual, the black individual that I'm referring to is John Yelding. He was subsequently, after the civil rights investigation, offered the position at Hope College as a resolve of all that stuff. We never found out what was the result of the negotiations, the settlement. It was a big stink here, a very ugly thing. It really exposed, showed the color, the nature, of this city. It was nasty. So that was one of the controversies that I remember.

JP: You mentioned Hope College. How has Hope College changed? How has that affected the community? How has the community affected that?

EG: In the past, as I said, when I say the past I'm talking about just my experience here in Holland and from what I've talked with other people. Hope College, 91-92, didn't have any effect, impact, presence at all in this community. Matter of fact, students at Hope College were really resented by, not the Dutch community, because Hope College is Dutch, but the other folks, the normal people (laughs), the average Joe Q. Citizen, the minorities, we resented students at Hope College because they thought they was big stuff, because they were so embraced by the Dutch community. You know, who in the heck do you think you are? A lot of that had to do with the spirituality of the campus. When I came in, there was literally none. The average attendance of the chapel was 15 people. Since Ben Patterson came on the staff, you

know the chapel attendance has been enormous. It's been overwhelming. Not because of Ben, it's been because of God. I've seen the spirituality of the campus change. The very people who I knew were opposed to the spiritual movement at Hope College, under Ben Patterson's direction, some of the faculty, professors, who I knew, came to me personally when they found out that Ben and I were becoming friends. I was literally told, advised, to separate myself from Ben Patterson, because the level of adversity that he was creating, that was coming against him at Hope College. Because I was becoming well known, I wasn't getting a lot of backing from both RCA and CRC. They didn't think that this would be a good alliance. I told them to go fly a kite. It personally confused me because I didn't understand. Here are Christians coming in against another Christian who is directing individuals to seek the Lord more. I didn't understand that. Why were they coming to me? At first, I wasn't accepted in this community. People didn't like me. I was an outsider. Now you're asking me to sever myself from an individual who's going through the same thing I went through? I didn't understand that. Why did they come to me? Like I was there boy or something. I'm serious. It offended me. But I saw those same professors, now, are beginning to address issues in their own spirituality. I've seen the attitude and efforts to reach this community and serve this community, come off that campus. In other words, individuals are beginning to say, we need to serve this community. And they're doing it, instead of just running off to the myth. I've seen not only the spirituality, spiritual life of the campus, but there's also some things being addressed in the curriculum and what to do in your curriculum. Is this a

Christian campus? That's going to mean a lot to this city as it goes on, in the development, what happens over there. I don't like the whole idea of the center or whatever is being built over there. They've displaced so many families, I don't know if that's Hope College or the city. But, Hope College is beginning to make an impact in the city, where as in '91... I had a niece that was being pursued to go to Hope College. She graduated from ----- High School, with honors, in Chicago. I advised her not to. I thought that she would get a bad deal. There's still minorities over there getting a bad deal, but I think it's a better deal than it was in '91-'92, because they were literally ostracized from there, made to feel like dirt over there. So things change. There's been a good change.

JP: Have you had much contact with minorities at Hope, and how do you see those minorities influence it?

EG: I did at first, Jim. In '92-'93 I did. I was a contact for the Black Coalition. That freaked me out because I thought it was all black, and then a white folk would come in, and I was like, "Oh, what's this?" Then after a while, that kind of diminished, because I've been perceived as being an advocate, and in my early days of recognition, of publicity, I was being perceived and pursued as a black advocate. I made that known, that I was not a black advocate, I was a Christian, first. I was a man second, that happened to be black. I'm proud of my African heritage and my African roots, but I'm a Christian first, and Jesus is Lord. So therefore, I would not pursue black issues. Understand what I'm saying. If someone came to me and said, "Eric, we're being treated unfairly, would you stand with us?" I would stand with

them. But, picketing, boycotting, protesting, things of that nature, I don't believe in them. I don't agree with that. You voice your opinion. You stand opposed against it, then you pray. All this human activity is a waste of time. All it does is develop conflict. I admire Martin Luther King, I exalt God because of Martin Luther King, because he broke the ice on a lot of different areas. But even Martin Luther King's effort crossed lines. The man died. He was assassinated. We've seen a lot of the stuff that was done that they turned around. I'm not saying what he did was a -----.

I'm not saying non-violent protest doesn't work, because it does. But what's the motive? Is the protest to bring fairness or equality? Fairness means, I want you to treat me fair. I'll stay away from you, I'll stay segregated from you, but I want you to treat me fair. That's not equality. Equality means, I want to be equal with you. Not only be treated equal with you, but I'm going to interact with you, so I can feel equal, and you can feel equal with me. I don't believe in fairness and segregation. That's not equality to me. So, I don't have much contact with the minority population at Hope anymore. I believe a lot of that came because of my stand for Jesus as Lord and not to be involved with political issues. I'm not a black politician. And they can come to me.

JP: Can you speak any about the industrialization problem? That's been happening since the '60s.

EG: What's going on now with the industrialization, the corporations and the expansion that they're doing, I think Holland is a very prosperous community, and also very cautious and nervous. I lived all over inner city Chicago, and the last community I

was in was called South Shore. That area used to be a very lucrative community. You couldn't live in it unless you had money, at one time. The steel mill was there. The steel mill paid a lot of money when people first were working at the steel mill. So the community became very lucrative and very productive. Businesses were opening up. Businesses moved there, because this community was very lucrative. When the steel mill closed, it impoverished that whole community, devastated that whole community. Businesses closed. I mean, it devastated. I'm just cautious about this community depending on the Prince, Herman Miller, Haworth, Life Saver, Donnelly. What happens if these corporations begin to move out. What happens to this community? What happens? Are we doing anything to offset? It didn't happen to Chicago overnight. It happened over a period of time. Mind you, this is a spiritual, Christian community, and a lot of the CEO's of these organizations that I named are Christian. The level of money, sometimes, can become too overwhelming. We're dealing with a situation now where a church is closing its doors and considering selling its building to a secular organization. Why should we sell out to the secular organizations? I don't believe that. Jesus wouldn't do that. I have concern about the industrialization in this community. I have concern about the draw that it's having on the country. People from different communities all over the country are coming here, because of there impoverished, financially oppressed situations, financially tough situations, they're coming here. What are we doing to embrace these people, to begin to develop community? We're not doing enough. A large number of individuals that are working here are living outside of this city.

Because of various reasons, a lot of it is transportation, there are people right here in this city that can't get jobs with Haworth, Herman Miller, Prince, and the like, because they don't have transportation. But individuals from Muskegon, South Haven, Grand Rapids, Benton Harbor, are coming here, because they have transportation to get here. What happens? They're making money. Where does that money go? Outside of the community. So economically, I'm concerned. I'm not saying none of this is going to happen or people are not looking at it. But I've seen the devastation that it had in other major cities. Look at the automotive industry in Detroit. When that thing collapsed, what happened? I mean, come on, wake up Holland. We don't want this to happen here. They're giving tax breaks to these corporations, and that's fine. But what I'm saying is, let's look at a long term plan. If these corporations move out, what are we going to do? Don't think of ways to get these folks here, because I'm telling you, if hiring a person to work at Prince, at entry level, if they're paying \$9 an hour, and things begin to develop with economic strain on that company, and they can go to Mexico and pay this person a dollar an hour, don't you think they're going to go? I'm not saying that this is the mind set, but if you economically drain a corporation because of taxes and all this kind of good stuff, and the city is addressing those issues, literally they're going to move. My statement to that, and this is a long way of answering this question, I'm concerned about a city that depends upon the economic development of the industry.

JP: What do you make of the increasing diversification of Holland?

EG: It has improved over the years. Particularly with the school system pursuing minority



graduates and minority teachers. The corporations with pursuing minority executives. It's improving, but it still has a long way to go. Right now, a lot of the corporations are going outside the community, to look for these individuals. I think that we should, as a community... What can we do that would raise up young black Americans in Holland to be future leaders in Holland? What can we do to raise up a young Latino and Asian Americans here in Holland to be leaders in this community? What can we do instead of importing people? So we've got a long way to go. Mind you, these are my personal opinions about things. I'm not a political genius or advocate, or financial, economic, or industrial genius or advocate. But looking at the history of how things happen in major cities, and how a small city turning to a major city. If something is written in the sand, we need to look at it. If we're following in the foot steps of other cities, we need to look at where did they end up, and how do we prevent that from happening. I mean, every option, including the diversification of the city. Holland can become the model for America. It can, if we take the proper steps. The city council right now is all white. One of the things that I hate in this community, it's difficult for me to deal with at Holland, when I go to committees and organizations and meetings, whatsoever, we want to address youth issues: there's not one young person on the panel. Or, we have been invited to talk about issues concerning blacks, and I'm the only black on the panel. I'm a tokenizer. They feel safe inviting me because I'm not radically black. I'm radically Christian, which is different. I think a city council should reflect the diversity of this community. If these individuals are making decisions governing and effecting the diversity of this

community, it should reflect that. I'm not just talking about some tokenizer. Get some people on there that's going to be the voice for those communities. I'm turning down stuff. They're inviting me to talk about this and represent this. I'm not representing the black community. I wouldn't mind being that, but I'm not that. Get a representative that's more radical on the issues of Afro-American concerns than I am. I'm radical about Christian issues. I just happen to be black. So, yes, we're growing, we're changing, we need more improvement. I wish this tokenizing would stop, and patronizing would stop.

JP: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today? How do they interact with what's here right now?

EG: The first part of that question is how has it affected the community, what role does it play in the community. One positive and one negative. The positive is that it gives this community roots. It gives it a foundation. Where as other cities do not have that. The negative side is that it breeds isolation and segregation. One of the first things that I heard when I came here was, "if you're not Dutch, you're not much." Here's a group of people who were Dutch who were saying this out of pride, but to me, who was black and hearing it, it's racism. So you're telling me, I'm beneath you. In certain circles, and right now today, as popular and well-known as I am, and I say that with all humility, I can go in certain circles, not only because I'm black, but because I'm not Dutch, I'm not respected. Period. I will not get respect or acknowledgment, or recognition in some circles, because I'm not Dutch. I'm straight up serious about that. So there's a positive and a negative to it.

JP: Just a finishing question. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the Holland community as far as cities go?

EG: Compared to other cities this size? I would say a seven. I'd like to add this, I was part of the delegation that went down to Fort Worth, Texas, to make a presentation for this city to receive the recognition of All-American City. During the planning stages, the whole thing, I was asked to come in, and they asked me my opinion. I said this: to be labelled All-American City, seems to me something that the whole city should have pride in. There are pockets in this community that could care less about the All-American status. There are some people in this community right now today, that don't even know Holland has it. It would seem to me that this would be something that the whole city would be glad to have. If the whole city is not glad, then getting it don't mean much. We just have a status. There needs to be more done to build pride about being in this city. You can go right down here on 18th street and talk to any family, any child, and 70% of those people will tell you, if you say, "Are you proud of being here in Holland?" They would say, "I'm glad to be here." But proud to be here is a different thing. With that in mind, I would say we're a seven. There's a lot of good things happening here. I'm very optimistic. This is a very productive town. But the reason why I wouldn't rate it a ten or above, is because all the people here don't think so. Everybody's not going to be happy everywhere you go, but I don't think we're making a concerted effort to give people an option, whether they can be happy here or not. Do you understand what I'm saying? It seems as though we're not concerned. A lot of money was spent to send

us down to Fort Worth, Texas, and win this award. We got a lot of whatever for receiving this award, but who's the beneficiary in this, who benefits from? I've heard the mayor say the whole city benefits from it. Not really. Not really. It's a sad thing for me to say, and end this on. But I have a concern about that. I do. So, I would rate it as seven.

JP: Thank you to Eric Gray who is co-pastor at Maple Avenue Ministries. Thank you very much, Eric.

Initial Contact Form

Name: ERIC GRAY

Date of birth: [date removed]

Place of birth: CHGO, IL

Mother's name (include maiden name): LUCILLE ANDERSON

Father's name: LOUIS

Siblings' names (include birthdates if known):

DEBRA ANN [date removed]  
NINA RENEE [date removed]

Spouse's name (include wife's maiden name): N/A

Date of marriage:

Place of marriage:

Children's names (include dates and places of birth):

TIJUANA GRAY  
KENA [dates removed] > CHGO

Date of death:

Place of death and burial:

Religion and church membership: NON-DENOM / MAPLE AVE MINISTRIES

Schooling and/or other training: HOPE STUDENT

Residential history (list all residences chronologically, noting the dates lived at each):

HOLLAND - 1990 - PRESENT  
CHGO - 1953 - 1990

Occupational history (list all occupations chronologically, noting the place of work, the type of work done there, and the approximate salary):

MAPLE AVE - CO-PASTOR [salaries removed]  
HOLLAND TEEN MINISTRY - DIRECTOR  
BIL-MAR FOODS - LABORER

Membership in clubs and organizations (note dates of membership and offices held):

Other general information: