

Autobiography of Richard Allen Rhem

**West Olive, Michigan
Spring, 2013**

On February 11, 1935, I was welcomed into the lives of Richard and Effie Rhem, joining a family of three sisters, Esther, Josephine, and Lois - nine, eleven and thirteen years older than I. It was like having four “mothers” as well as a very proud father.

As I look back on my early childhood and youth, I realize I was saturated with love and adoration. That, however, did not mean that my home and family were not thoroughly structured; there was high expectation, serious discipline and, above all, a deeply spiritual center.

We lived in Parchment, Michigan, a small village bordering Kalamazoo, where we were part of the Dutch community, my grandparents on both sides having immigrated from The Netherlands.

The center of our lives was the church – the Third Reformed Church of Kalamazoo. Celery farmers and small business folk made up the congregation – very parochial, conservative and serious. This church community was the center of our religious and social life and, for me, Sunday worship, morning and evening, Sunday School, Catechism classes and Youth Group were the framework for my week. There was never any question about whether I would attend; it was a given. It was a heavy schedule. Yet I never rebelled. I suspect in retrospect that I did not rebel because my parents never asked of me what they themselves did not live; their seriousness and authenticity called me to serious engagement as well.

My schooling began in the Christian school, but I entered the Parchment School in the third grade. Parchment Public School took me through the ninth grade from which I graduated as Valedictorian. High School was at Kalamazoo Central, from which I graduated with High Honors. After my Freshman year at Kalamazoo College, I transferred to Hope College in Holland, Michigan, graduating in 1957 *Summa Cum Laude*. The Reformed Church in America’s Western Theological Seminary was just across the street and I graduated from the seminary with a B.D. degree (now a M.Div.) in 1960.

I received a call from the First Reformed Church in Spring Lake, Michigan and was ordained to the Christian ministry in June 1960. I experienced four good years at the Spring Lake congregation. In the spring of 1964 I received and accepted a call to the First Reformed Church of Midland Park, New Jersey. After three years there, I took my family to The Netherlands, for post-graduate study. Professor Hendrikus Berkhof, Professor of Dogmatics at the University of Leiden, accepted me into a doctoral program.

After my freshman year in college, I had married and in 1967 we had a family of three children. Arriving in The Netherlands in 1967, we were well housed and settled, but in 1970 my wife decided to return to the U.S. with the children, the marriage in question. I continued my doctoral work but determined I needed to see the children and make a decision about the marriage. In December of 1970 I came home with a return trip ticket to The Netherlands. My visit with the children caused me to take them into my care. I made a quick round trip to The Netherlands to collect my belongings and returned to my children.

In that rather dire situation I was offered a position in the Religion Department of Hope College and a call to my former congregation in Spring Lake. I accepted the invitation from the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake to take up once again my ministry – with three children, eleven, nine and seven, for whom to care. The outreach of the congregation to me and my children was quite amazing. It was a new beginning of pastoral ministry that continued until my retirement in 2004.

The confidence shown to me and the gracious embrace of the congregation was in light of knowing my divorce was pending. Two years later, on Christmas Day, 1972, I married a beautiful lady who brought her own three children to the family and we have become one family.

The congregation voted to change its name from First Reformed to Christ Community Church, June 7, 1971. And we grew and prospered. With great grace and wisdom, my dear Professor Berkhof released me from the pressure of completing my doctoral dissertation. I had received my *Doctorandus* Degree from Leiden in April of 1969 and I had had the first chapter of the dissertation approved – a comparison of the theology of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg on the traces of God's action in history. But Professor Berkhof said,, "God has called you to a greater work!"

As Christ Community grew, we built a ministry team which enabled me to be engaged at several points in the life of the Reformed Church in America.

Denominational posts I filled were:

- President, Particular Synod of Michigan, 1962-1963;
- Missioner, Department of Evangelism, 1961-1967;
- Commissioner, The Theological Commission, 1964-1967;
- Chairperson, Task Force on Evangelism and Renewal, 1974-1981;
- Chairperson, Dallas Task Force, 1978-1980;
- Member, The Board of Theological Education, 1981-1987;
- Chairperson, Management Committee of Western Theological Seminary, 1983-1986;
- Moderator of the Board of Theological Education, 1986-1987.

Beyond those assignments, I was the Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary in 1987-1988 and 1988-1989. I resigned at that point because an article I wrote in *Perspectives, a Journal of Reformed Thought*, which the Reformed Church created to engage RCA leadership in theological conversation, created quite a stir. The issue was the extent of God's grace – grace I hoped may be as wide as the human family. Rather than see the Seminary come under attack, I resigned and returned full time to Christ Community which had given me time to do the teaching while continuing as their pastor along with a pastoral team.

The Reformed Church judicatory to which we were accountable did not challenge me at this time. But in the early 90s, Christ Community sponsored a workshop on ministry to persons with AIDS. An attendee, a pastor who was beginning the Metropolitan Congregation in Muskegon, told of having to meet in the basement of a bar because no church would give them space. We offered our chapel. *The Muskegon Chronicle* wrote up the story. At that point the RCA judicatory, the Muskegon Classis, came after Christ Community, the gay-lesbian ministry being the catalyst, but my view of the extent of God's Grace becoming the issue. After engagement in which I explained my theological understanding, I was judged to be outside of the pale of Reformed orthodoxy.

The Muskegon Classis agreed to allow us to “separate peaceably” from the RCA, but RCA officials really did not want us to leave and such a move was contrary to Presbyterian polity. The conflict dragged on until, finally, in December 1997, we were recognized as an independent congregation.

I experienced a fresh sense of freedom to probe the faith and deepen our growing understanding of Christian existence. As expressed in the title of a book of sermons published at my retirement – *Re-Imagining the Faith* – I continued to wonder, question, and find deep conviction in my understanding of the God become flesh in Jesus.

My June of 2004 retirement was a grand celebration in a remarkable community of faith, full of Grace.

Retirement has not caused me to cease my wonder, my quest, my ongoing endeavor to probe, to learn, to experience life in the Presence of the Sacred Mystery that is the source, ground and goal of the amazing cosmic dance into which we are caught up.

For further reflections on his journey, see:

“Address to the Reformed Synod of the Mid-Atlantic”, October 4, 1996

“The Church in Conflict – Can Non-Believers Be Saved?”, October 4, 1996

“As One Without Authority”, Summer, 2001

“From Orthodoxy to Freedom”, Fall, 2001

“The Making of a Liberal”, August 6, 2006

“The Magnificent Vision of Shalom”, August 27, 2006

“Here I Stand”, September 24, 2006

“The Nature and Function of Religion”, July 30, 1999 from the Lecture Series
How My Mind Has Changed.