

# Interview with Richard Poortinga

Mark Hoeksema

*It is June 21, 2008, and I am at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Poortinga in Dyer, Indiana*

**MHH:** Mr. Poortinga, where and when you were born?

**RP:** I was born in Munster, Indiana, not too far from here. December 25, 1924.

**MHH:** A Christmas baby!

**RP:** A Christmas baby, yes. It was also the time when they had the big dispute in the synod of 1924.

**MHH:** So that's a fairly easy birthday to remember. It has double significance.

**RP:** Right. But the Christmas party wasn't the greatest (laughter). My mother loved it.

**MHH:** Who were your parents?

**RP:** Mr. and Mrs. Steven Poortinga.

**MHH:** And what was their background and history? Tell me a little bit about your family.

**RP:** My dad came from Friesland in Holland. My mother came from Zeeland ("Sayland," I guess they call it in the Netherlands). My father emigrated here. I think it was first his sister and a brother who came over here. They earned some money, and they sent the money back to Holland. Then [*my father*] and his brother came here. They worked here for awhile, and then they made enough money with the four of them to send over for the whole family to come over here. They lived right in Lansing, Illinois. That was at the turn of the century.

**MHH:** And you have how many brothers and sisters?

**RP:** Originally there were eight in our family. My sister died when she was, I think, 15 years old. And now there are four remaining yet of us. There are three sisters and one brother left.

**MHH:** Did you grow up in the Lansing area?

**RP:** I grew up between Munster and Lansing. And now I'm living in Dyer.

**MHH:** What did your father do for a living?

**RP:** My father was a farmer. He farmed and he also truck-farmed. When he originally came from the Netherlands, I think he worked on a farm too. He did other work occasionally, but he mostly was a farmer.

**MHH:** What are your memories of your youth? Tell me a little bit about your childhood and adolescence.

**RP:** I worked on the farm most of my life, till I got married—always worked on the farm. When I was younger, I remember working in the Van Baren’s warehouse, the [onion] set house. I probably was around 16 or 17 years old then.

**MHH:** During your childhood and adolescence, what was your church affiliation and the affiliation of your family?

**RP:** Well, I only remember the Protestant Reformed Church when I was young, because my dad went to the Protestant Reformed Church in 1926, when I was only two years old. So, I was a charter member, but I don’t remember much of it. And I always went to a Christian School—Munster Christian School (now it’s the Lansing Christian School). And I had my catechism all in the Protestant Reformed Church until 1943.

**MHH:** What is significant about 1943?

**RP:** Then’s when we had the problems in South Holland Church with the minister, Rev. [L.] Vermeer. I think that’s pretty well known to some people, to some people not.

**MHH:** It’s not well-known to me, so would you like to talk about that?

**RP:** I was young at that time. It was very traumatic to me.

**MHH:** You’re speaking about an issue that took place in 1943 regarding Rev. Vermeer, who was pastor of South Holland at that time.

**RP:** What I remember—a lot of it is hearsay, and I don’t really want to slander anybody. There was this group that was going to the consistory and saying that Rev. Vermeer attended taverns. He did like to drink, and he had obviously tried to quit. There were people from the Lansing region who went to the Reformed church. They said, “Boy, your minister is really a cut-up. He is a nice man.” They enjoyed him because they met him at the taverns. This was actually not a tavern so much as a road house.

**MHH:** What does a road house mean?

**RP:** They had women there, too. A roadhouse was not too good of a place, as far as I’m concerned. It was in Calumet City. My father and others knew this, and they protested to the consistory with this. I don’t think they did it the right way. When you protest, you have to have proof. They didn’t have proof. They had hearsay. It’s these people who said he was there. And hearsay doesn’t really stand up in the consistory. I know that. I know the way it should be done. Of course, they didn’t want to go down there and catch him in there. Although, at the end of the whole deal somebody did go down there and found him over there. I don’t know if you want me to say the name.

**MHH:** Sure.

**RP:** I think it was Menno Smits. He was a member of the church. He found him over there, and he went to the consistory. The consistory worked with him for awhile, and they put him under censure. It was Ade Poortinga, my dad, and Mr. Miedema, and I don’t know who else, who were put under censure.

**MHH:** For what reason?

**RP:** It was probably because of slander. They were slandering the minister. They were telling stories that weren't right about the minister. I could feel the undertone in the house between my mother and my father. He was very moody at times, and at last she couldn't take it no more. She just couldn't take it any more. So then after they had him under censure, he left the church.

**MHH:** And went where?

**RP:** Went to Munster Christian Reformed Church. That's where I met my wife.

**MHH:** What was the upshot for Vermeer and for South Holland congregation? Was this resolved or swept under the rug? What happened?

**RP:** I could tell you how it happened. We came back with my dad—I and my brother Dan, all came back in 1957. We left in about 1943. We all came back to [*the Protestant Reformed*] church because we knew we didn't belong in the [*Christian Reformed*] church. And my wife came back with me at that time. The upshot was that Rev. Vermeer left South Holland in 1945.

**MHH:** Did he take a call?

**RP:** He took a call. And, as you know, every place he went, he had the same problems.

**RH:** I didn't know.

**RP:** Every place he went he had the same problems. He left in 1953, and then he went to Bethesda and there he had the same problem. But there they caught him., and he was not a minister any more. And the end of his life was quite bad, because, I think, he had a lot of mental problems.

When we came back, then your father [*Prof. Homer S. Hoeksema*] was minister over there [*South Holland, IL*]. And there was one left of the old consistory that dealt with my dad. When they came back, they had to make it up—Mr. Lanting and Pa, they had to come together and they...

**MHH:** To reconcile.

**RP:** Reconcile their differences, yes.

**MHH:** And that happened?

**RP:** That happened, yes. So that was a good way to end it all.

My dad was never happy in the Christian Reformed Church. I remember we used to have an older minister in Munster. His name was Rev. Bolt. He was of the old [*school*], before '24. He used to preach a sermon and then my dad said, "You ruined that whole sermon on the end. You had a good sermon, but you ruined it." He had to preach common grace, of course. He had to bring it in, you see?

**MHH:** So he was definitely not pleased with a lot of things that were going on there.

**RP:** Oh, no. My dad was not. My mother passed away over there [*Christian Reformed Church*], and we had a lot of friends over there. I met this lovely lady over there (laughter), and we got married.

**MHH:** So you did not experience first-hand the entire history of the split of '53.

**RP:** No. I did follow it a little.

**MHH:** Were you affected at all, Mr. Poortinga, by World War II?

**RP:** No. I had two brothers that went. Conrad went in the Coast Guard. He really enlisted in 1941. I had another brother that was drafted into the Navy. That was Daniel. He went back to the Protestant Reformed Church. Conrad never did. I went up to Indianapolis to be drafted. I needed a physical. I passed the physical, but I was pulled out because when I went into the line I threw up. I was very nauseated. So they took me out and they put me to another line. I had to visit all kinds of psychiatrists. Amazingly, when I come home, they gave me a 4F. I guess they thought I was a little psycho (laughter).

After that, then my other brother got drafted. He was on the farm. One of us could stay on the farm.

**MHH:** So you missed it and he went.

**RP:** Well, I was again drafted for the Korean War, and I was ready to go. The date was set that I had to go. Then I had an appendectomy (emergency). So for six months they couldn't take me in the Army. And I turned over age after that—turned 28, so they couldn't take me.

**MHH:** Really!

**RP:** Laughter. Providential. I say that's the Lord's doing. He evidently didn't want me in the Army. That's all you can say.

**MHH:** Yes, because they certainly missed you twice (laughter). That's interesting. Was there anything else that helped to shape your character and your thinking or your attitude towards the church? You talked about the problems in the early 1940s. Are there any other events or incidents that stand out in your mind connected with the church?

**RP:** In 1957, if you recall, that was the time when divorce and remarriage was a big problem in the Christian Reformed Church. They were opening the doors to it. That really was very sensitive to us. We didn't believe in it. Even her father and mother never believed that divorce and remarriage was right. I even remember having a debate. I still have the papers yet. We had a debate on that in our Men's Society. Myself and one of the other fellows debated with the two ministers over there at present. And it was amazing. We got God's word out, and they didn't. They didn't take what we said. They just said, they just took it for granted that it was good enough. But their they all wanted hearsay—not God's word.

**MHH:** Just purely a matter of opinion.

**RP:** Yes, just opinions.

**MHH:** Amazing. So that started already in the mid-50s.

**RP:** Oh, yes. I remember the limited atonement deal in the Christian Reformed Church—Dr. Dekker. I followed all this, and, yes, it was the Lord's leading us back to the church. He took us back when our children were young, which we were very thankful for. There are some that came back from different

groups, and their children were brought up in the Christian Reformed Church, and most of their children never came along.

**MHH:** It's amazing when they're born and educated in another denomination, and then they're older when their parents come back. You see that so often. Parents know better and they come back, but the rest stay behind. *[At this point Mrs. Tena Poortinga (TP) enters the conversation].* Mrs. Poortinga has some comments that she would like to add.

**TP:** When we came back, I went with Dick. I wasn't used to that kind of *[Protestant Reformed]* preaching because I had my catechism in the Christian Reformed Church, and Prof. Hoeksema, Rev. Hoeksema at the time, talked about the "lie." I didn't know what he was talking about. In his sermons, it was always about the lie. Well, I had problems understanding him, so I wasn't too happy with the preaching. But then they decided to have a doctrinal class. I think it was for my purpose your father did that. There were some other, couples that came, too: Frank and Eileen VanBaren were just married, and they came. She was having problems too. So then we had a doctrinal class, and slowly on it started getting better. Now I had learned! I just wasn't used to that type of preaching, so I had a lot to learn.

**MHH:** So, even in those days the Christian Reformed Church was becoming weak in its doctrinal teaching and positions?

**TP:** They didn't believe like Protestant Reformed Church did, so it was just a matter of learning for me, you know?

**MHH:** As you look back on your own personal history, are you glad that you're here?

**TP:** Oh, it's the best thing I did. I'm so happy that I did that, for my children, too. And for me. It's about 49 years that I've been in the church. And, oh, I had a lot to learn. But I enjoy the preaching, and I would never, never go back.

**MHH:** That's great.

**TP:** Very, very thankful. This was all in the Lord's plan, too.

But I did have a difficult time at first, and I'm not the only one. There are more people *[who have this problem]* when they first come if it means anything to them.

**RP:** That's what it really brings out—if they can just throw away the preaching that they had, then they haven't been there. But they had to absorb the new preaching of God's word. And God's word, when it's spoken, bears its fruit.

**MHH:** Speaking of preaching and of the past, I'd like to direct this question to you. When you look back over your lifetime, how would you compare the church of today with the church of yesterday—say in either prior to the time that you left or perhaps after you came back in 1957?

**RP:** Well, I think there's been a development of the truth. I think the ministers and the seminary stand stand pretty strong. The preaching is a little different, I think. If I remember your grandfather *[Herman*

*Hoeksema*], I remember going to church and hearing him preach a sermon in the morning, and then he said, “Well, I just can’t quite get finished with it. I’m going to finish this this afternoon.” And Rev. Ophoff used to do the same thing. I still think that our churches are developing and the truth is developing. I can’t say, “Well, they’re going this way, they’re going that way.” No, I think the church is developing in God’s word. It’s still strong. But there has been change.

**MHH:** In what way do you think? I’d like to pursue this, because I’ve heard this from others as well.

**RP:** I think the change is in the covenant view. They’ve developed the covenant so much. I think that’s good. I’ve read a lot about it. I read quite a bit now, but I don’t absorb it as much as I used to. When you’re younger you can absorb more of it. And I think I can say, with all this doctrine of conditions, Federal Vision and all that, it brings out God’s truth. You can see it all around us. You can see the churches departing. We can see it in our family so much. The ones that have left don’t get preaching anymore. We have to be fed. I would say that some people say that the church is losing its distinctiveness. The preachers don’t preach God’s word anymore. I can’t go along with that. I can’t go along with that. I think they preach God’s word.

**MHH:** I’ve heard it said that there has been over time a less sharp emphasis or even a compromise on the truth of the antithesis. Would you agree or disagree with that?

**RP:** I don’t think so. I think the antithesis is still preached in the church. Sometimes the minister preaches the antithesis. He doesn’t have to say the word “antithesis” all the time. If you listen to his sermon, you know he’s preaching the antithesis. Naturally, there are weaknesses in the church. I mean, I’m not gonna say that the church is infallible. There are weaknesses, I mean to say, but, on the average, I’d say that our churches have been holding fast to the word of God.

**MHH:** I’ve also heard it said, that there is insufficient emphasis on grace and election and too much emphasis on man’s responsibility. Would you agree or disagree with that?

**RP:** I can’t say that there’s such overemphasis on man’s responsibility. I think it depends how you listen. I’m not saying that the church is perfect. It varies from one minister to another. I know that. I can feel that. But to say that one minister doesn’t preach God’s word and the other one preaches God’s word, one might be more doctrinal than the other, no. We have to live our doctrine. We can preach doctrine, but if we don’t live the doctrine, what have we got?

**MHH:** Are there any other issues that you would like to address or any opinions that you would like to express? And that can be on pretty much any subject you choose in connection with the church—positive or negative, it doesn’t matter.

**RP:** I served on the school board in the Christian school in South Holland. We had an issue there with the administrator we had there. We wanted to make a rule that the administrator only come to the board meeting to present his agenda to the school board and then he leave, that he doesn’t attend the whole

school board meeting. And that certain administrator did not like that rule. He wanted to be at the school board the whole time. That created a big problem in our school. I think we had a book about this thick that went to the classis because of writing between each other—the administrator and the school board.

And at that time we also voted in a minister into the school board, which was very unwise. And it divided the South Holland church and the Oak Lawn church.

**MHH:** That would have been Vanden Berg, right?

**RP:** Rev. [G.] Vanden Berg, right. I think that it's a very volatile issue when you start the school and you put the church with it. The school should stay separate from the church. The minister should never involve himself. He can give his opinion, but he should not give his opinion off the pulpit. That's beside the point. You have an opinion, and you have a right to your opinion. But then to get the church involved—that was a big issue in South Holland church at that time.

And it was also a big issue in Oak Lawn Church. I think it kind of broke that church up too. I think most of them came to South Holland after they left [*Oak Lawn*]. It was all settled, but there were lots of problems.

*[Here follows a lengthy discussion regarding recent school and church issues. While this is historically valuable, it contains many personal references that are not appropriate for publication. Regrettably this material has therefore been redacted].*

**MHH:** This concludes the interview with Mr. and Mrs. Poortinga. My thanks to both of them for participating.

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