Interview with The Right Reverend Rodney R. Michel, by Clark Groome, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania Oral History Project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 4, 2015.

CLARK GROOME: Where are you from, and did you grow up an Episcopalian, or did you come to that later in life?

RODNEY MICHEL: I came to that later in life. I'm from Nebraska. I grew up in a Methodist family, and my family was very active. We lived in a smallish town, and one of those small congregations. My mother was the church pianist, and every family had to take their turn stoking the furnace in the winter, and cleaning the church. And I did all the things that people do, you know, youth minister for youth work, and youth group, and Sunday school teaching, and the whole thing. When I went off to college, I—

CG: Where did you go?

RM: I began at Nebraska Wesleyan, and in taking some history courses, discovered more about the Episcopal Church. There was a small Episcopal parish in the town where I grew up. They had a sort of part-time priest, and I really didn't know much about the church at all until I got to college and discovered this wonderful, rich history.

CG: Of which the Methodists were a part?

RM: Of which the Methodists were a part of, a child. So I began attending a little congregation out near the university where I was going, Saint David's in Lincoln, Nebraska, and at that time I was a pre-theological student.

CG: When did you move from Nebraska Wesleyan to Saint David's?

RM: Well, I started at Saint David's while I was a sophomore, and the interesting thing was I was a student pastor in a small country Methodist church.

CG: So the thought of going into the ministry had been something that—?

RM: Yes, it had been.

CG: When did that—all right, let's go back just for a second.

RM: Sure.

CG: When did that call seem to start?

RM: That was planted in me by grandmother who had grown up as a Danish Lutheran, and felt all of her life that she was called to be a foreign missionary. When she was sixteen and ready to get some college education, her father came to her and said, "My sister has just died, and her husband has been left with seven children, and you are moving there next week to help raise them." So she told the story many, many times. Her hopes of becoming a missionary were dashed, but.

CG: Could women become missionaries in those days?

RM: Probably not; she would not have been an ordained pastor.

CG: Right.

RM: The equivalent of what we then called deaconesses.

CG: AH! OK.

RM: So she was a really important factor in my life, and encouraged me, and I'm sure guided me, even unbeknownst to her, perhaps. But that was the beginning of the call. And I really, my original call was to be a missionary.

CG: That makes sense.

RM: I wanted to go to a foreign land and spread the gospel.

CG: Well, you ended up in Pennsylvania.

RM: [Laughs] Right.

CG: [Laughs] Sorry.

RM: So while I was serving as a student pastor, I always was weary of the pastoral prayer in the Methodist Church, because I thought that the clergy always used it as a way to slip in another sermon, beat people over the head whilst they were praying to God. So I went to the city from my university digs one Saturday with a friend, and looking for a book of prayers. And he picked up a small *Book of Common Prayer*, and said, "Oh, look, this says *Book of Common Prayer*. I bet it has a lot of prayers. I'll buy it for you." And I took it home and read it through, and that really is what began to convert me.

CG: What part of Nebraska was this?

RM: This was in Lincoln, Nebraska

CG: Lincoln.

RM: The capital.

CG: Okay, the capital.

RM: When I told my theology professor, a Methodist, that I had been confirmed on May 1st, 1963, he sort of went into apoplexy. He was a southerner, and said, "Oh, my brother is an Episcopalian, and he goes to a church in Kentucky, and they have completely built their church with money from race horses." And he said, "You don't want to—this is a big mistake." [Laughs] Well, long story short, he sort of convinced me that my career at Nebraska Wesleyan was finished.

CG: That was a Methodist school?

RM: It was a Methodist school. So I transferred to the University of Nebraska, and there we had a wonderful Canterbury Club.

CG: Okay, sure.

RM: Which those of us of more mature years will remember, because it was a very strong college ministry. And in that chapel—there was actually a chapel on the university campus—there was a great priest who was just, everybody could identify with him, and he did all kinds of programs. There was a group called the Bishop's Study Club, so-called because once a year the bishop would come and review a book with us, or do something like that. There were nine fellows in that group, and eight of us became Episcopal priests.

CG: Wow, that's pretty good.

RM: The other one—it was a very powerful ministry.

CG: That's a pretty good—yeah, wow!

RM: So then I was sort of launched, and got very much active in the Episcopal Church when I graduated. My senior year—

CG: What was your major, you were?

RM: My major was education and history, and I was preparing to be a social studies teacher, and then I went to visit—I went to see the bishop, Russell Rauscher, of Nebraska.

CG: How do you spell that?

RM: R-A-U-S-C-H-E-R.

CG: Okay, he was the bishop of Nebraska?

RM: He was the diocesan—to talk about seminary, and he said, "Well, I think you may have a vocation, but I'll tell you that I'm asking all young men," because in those days—

CG: That's all it was.

RM: —that's what it was, "to plan to do something for a couple of years between college and seminary."

CG: Right.

RM: "I want you to have a real life experience, so that when you get ordained and go to a parish, you'll be able to identify with the people you're ministering to." So that convinced me further to finish my education degree. And so I did, graduated, and taught American History to 9th graders for three years.

CG: That's saintly work.

RM: And it was just before the educational world changed. Students would still listen to teachers, and—

CG: So it was before the whole '60s thing?

RM: It was before the whole '60s revolution. It was actually in the mid-'60s, but I think the revolution had been late getting—

CG: To Nebraska?

RM: —getting to Nebraska. And then in those days, the bishop of Nebraska, at least, didn't give you options. He told you where you would be going to seminary. So in 1967 I packed off to Seabury Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

CG: Right. A good one.

RM: With my young wife. And in those days, if you were married but had no children, you got one room in married students housing. And we had been married three years, and knew that much as we loved each other, we could not live in one room. [Laughs]

CG: [Laughs]

RM: So I swam against the tide actually, and got an apartment off-campus.

CG: Was that a no-no?

RM: That was a no-no. There had been one student in every class that had done that. In fact, the apartment was sort of passed down from—

CG: One to another?

RM: —one to another. But the dean was very much against that, because those were the days when we still ate two meals a day together as seminarians, and we went to chapel twice a day, every day, and I think he thought if we were living on the campus we would be much more attentive. And I was four blocks away, so I was dutifully attentive. And when I graduated in 1970, the fellow and his wife who took the apartment was Christopher Epting, who became the bishop of Iowa, and then the presiding bishop's ecumenical officer.

CG: For Frank?

RM: Yeah, right.

CG: Frank Griswold.

RM: And is now living out somewhere in the Middle West, I think.

CG: Yeah, I know the name, because he was around when I was going to those conventions.

RM: Sure, yes, a great guy. He was from one of the Florida dioceses, and I don't remember who got the apartment after he graduated, but it served a noble purpose, because for my class, it became a gathering place for all of the students. My wife would fix a meal, and everybody would come over and socialize and have a drink, and so forth, things we really weren't supposed to be doing at the seminary.

CG: Well it's a little easier for an Episcopalian than a Methodist.

RM: Oh, much. [Laughs] Although, our apartment was right next to the Garrett Seminary married apartment building, and we could see the garbage bins [laughs] on garbage day, even though they had all taken a pledge not to drink.

CG: There was plenty of bottles in there?

RM: Someone in that building was drinking. [Laughs] Anyways.

CG: [Laughs] Okay, so after you graduated, tell me briefly about your professional career, not great detail, but where did you start your ministry?

RM: I was ordained in the very university chapel where I had been active as a young Episcopalian and student, and was sent out to Gordon, Nebraska, way out on the far northwest corner of the state of Nebraska, where Wyoming and Nebraska and South Dakota all come together.

CG: Okay.

RM: And it was sort of a baptism by fire. We didn't have the luxury of curacies, because—

CG: It was a small, relatively small diocese?

RM: It was a relatively small diocese, and anybody with a collar was needed. So my closest neighbor was 60 miles away, and for the first six months of my ministry he would come and celebrate the Eucharist.

CG: Because you were still a deacon?

RM: I was still a deacon, and I would have reserved sacrament to serve to the folks. And in December of that year I was ordained to the priesthood.

CG: Let me ask you a question, back then, the tradition was more a year as a deacon, wasn't it, in a lot of places?

RM: Yes, it was in many places.

CG: I think it was in a Pennsylvania.

RM: If you could serve a curacy, that was the ideal.

CG: A year, and then a year.

RM: And then a year, right.

CG: Curacies were two years, as I understand it.

RM: Of course. So I had three congregations. I drove 120 miles every Sunday between these three congregations.

CG: What happened when it snowed?

RM: Well, surprisingly, in the three years I was there I don't remember a Sunday that I couldn't.

CG: Couldn't do all three?

RM: Couldn't do all three.

CG: How did you plan the services? I mean, was it just one at 9, one at 11, one at—?

RM: Basically, I think it was one at 8, one at 9:30, and one at 11 o'clock.

CG: Wow.

RM: We lived in the same—

CG: Not a lot of time for coffee hour.

RM: No, there wasn't. You just sort of kept your cassock on, jumped in the car and moved on to the next place. But it was a wonderful—they were all three wonderful congregations.

CG: Must have been terrific training, too.

RM: Because they had—oh, they always had a seminarian, basically, like myself. The people would usually serve three or four years, and then move on to a larger call, and then they'd get another greenhorn. But they were blessed, and skillful at training us up to be good priests.

CG: So when you were done after your three years here?

RM: So when I was done after my three years, I went to Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, which is a large community up on the old Oregon Trail. I was following a man who had been there 35 years.

CG: Oh, boy.

RM: A number of senior clergy took me aside and said, "This is a big mistake. This could ruin your priesthood. You have to be really strong." Because the retiree was living in the community.

CG: Oh, of course.

RM: And had married very late in life, so was still fairly vigorous, and his wife wanted him to be very vigorous. So I soon discovered that when I would go out of town for a holiday, I'd come back and find four or five baptisms, and a wedding or two. He just couldn't—

CG: He couldn't retire?

RM: No, he couldn't retire. But I endured, and worked with him rather than against him. And I was there ten years, and during those ten years we built a big addition to the parish. And after ten years I went to the bishop and said, "I don't want to do to another priest what this beloved rector has done for me. I've served ten years; I think I've accomplished a lot, but just keep your eyes open for a place where my skills might be used, because I think—

CG: Now's the time, yeah.

RM: —now's the time to move along." Thinking that I might get moved to the other end of the diocese. I lived 500 miles from the see city of Omaha, so it was a huge diocese.

CG: The whole state?

RM: The whole state.

CG: Yeah.

RM: It had once been two dioceses, and in 1943 they merged up and became one diocese. Well, anyway, six months later the bishop came to me and said, "You know, I was at a provincial meeting, and the bishop of North Dakota is looking for a person with your skills."

Grand Forks, North Dakota, which is the University of North Dakota home, and a large Air Force base.

CG: Right.

RM: And that was Harold Hopkins, who was Frank Griswold's—no, he was Ed—

CG: Browning's.

RM: Browning's pastoral ministry bishop. It was a parish that had had two rectors in 52 years, and the second one had been hand-picked by the first, so they had basically had one rector in 52 years. But with the Air Force people who had lived all over the world—I was a glutton for punishment.

CG: Yeah, I was about to say that. [Laughs]

RM: [Laughs] But the Air Force people who had lived all over the world, and seen the Episcopal Church in all of its many complexions, wanted to have a parish that was a little more with it. I think when I went there the parish was still using the [19]28 Prayer Book, and that was in 1981, when I went there.

CG: Okay.

RM: But it was a wonderful time. I spent five years there. I had a ministry at the university, a ministry at the Air Force base. I helped open up the people of the parish to serving the community. I mean, we had a city mission a block away from us, and the two, the parish and the mission, had never had much to do with each other, but they began to serve a meal once a week to mission folks.

CG: Your next stop was in Garden City, New York. How did you get from—

RM: Yes, well.

CG: —Grand Forks to Garden City? They seem about as far apart in lots of ways—

RM: At breakfast, my wife and I were talking. Mind you, the diocese of North Dakota had eight priests for the entire state, and that meant the eight of us had to be on every diocesan committee, with a lot of travelling, and trying to run a parish, and run all over the diocese. It was a challenge. So that, plus the cold was just severe up there. It would get cold in September, and you wouldn't see a temperature above zero for months. So, we decided that we would work with the Lord, and see if there was another place in the vineyard where—

CG: It might be a little warmer.

RM: —it might be a little more workable, and warmer. And I answered an advertisement in the *Living Church* for a curacy in Westbury, New York. And I came back and had an interview. The vestry was very excited.

The rector was on vacation, so they called him and he was just out on Fire Island, so he came in and interviewed me and said, "You can do this job with your eyes shut, but I really just need somebody just right out of seminary. You have too many gifts for this job." But he said, "I'm on the Cathedral Chapter, and we're looking for a new canon pastor, and I think that you would be great in that position." So he submitted my name to the dean, and I then went through the interview process. And so five years, let's see, '87, five years after we moved to Grand Forks, I became the canon pastor at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York.

CG: Garden City.

RM: Which was a wonderful ministry. I was at a place where I really just wanted to do pastoral work, and not have to be ordering toilet paper, and worrying about leaks in the roof, and all of the things that a rector has to do.

CG: Right.

RM: So I went to work for Robert Wilshire, who was an Australian fellow.

CG: He was the dean?

RM: He was the dean. We had a great time together.

CG: Wilshire, like, W-I-L-S-H-I-R-E?

RM: That's exactly right. And my real gifts in ministry are pastoral, so I called on the sick and the elderly, and so forth and so on, and I had a wonderful time there, and was not particularly looking for a move. But around four years after that, the bishop of the diocese asked me to consider a parish out in Bay Shore, Long Island, which is out really on the seashore near Jones Beach. And they had had trauma. [Laughs] The rector who had left followed a long-time rector, and I think in those days probably they weren't doing interim ministry as much. They would quickly get a new—

CG: That came up later, didn't it?

RM: It did come up later, yeah. And so it was not a good match, and finally he left and went to Florida. And again, it looked like a good challenge, and so I was called to be rector there in 1991. And when I went, I remember we had coffees in various homes, so that I could get to know the people. And I told the people, "I'm here, and I've got a few years of ministry left, and I anticipate that I will be here the rest of my ministry. And when I grow old and get ready to retire, we'll say goodbye, and you'll call another rector." And so we began to

rebuild the parish. It had been heavily traumatized, but I've always found that if you can help people understand that they can trust their priest, and that the priest is not going to hurt them or betray their trust, that you can begin to build. And so we did, and then the diocese began to have challenges. By the way, when I was—this is still to come up—I had known Charles Bennison during my days at Seabury Western. He was there for one year on his educational career. And so in 1996, '95 or '96, the Diocese of Long Island called for a bishop suffragan.

CG: Right. Had you ever thought about it?

RM: I had never thought about it. I was president of the standing committee. I had served on the standing committee in Nebraska many years before, where we had an alcoholic bishop, and went through all of that challenge. And the bishop of Long Island at the time was an active alcoholic, so.

CG: It was a troubled place, as I remember it.

RM: It was a very troubled place. And some of the senior clergy approached me, and asked if they could put my name in nomination. And I laughed, and said, "Oh, of course you can. Nothing's going to come of it," because the bishop's canon had been promised the job. Well, bishops and canons should know that's not something that can be promised.

CG: Promised.

RM: [Laughs] So we did—

CG: It's an election; it's not an appointment.

RM: Exactly.

CG: The queen is not there to appoint you. [Laughs]

RM: Indeed. So we went through the search; it was all local people. And the day of the election came, All Souls Day, 1996.

CG: November 2nd.

RM: And when the election started, one of the senior priests of the diocese got up and made a motion to adjourn the meeting, go home, and forget about electing a suffragan. Because I think the day before the famous *Playboy*, *Playgirl*, or whatever—there was a scandal about a priest in Brooklyn who had married or who had gotten involved with the boys from Brazil, and it was a horrible, nasty, traumatic scandal. And that magazine had come out the day before the election. So everybody was just, you know, distressed and anxious. But the motion was overruled, the election went forward, and I believe on the third ballot I was elected, and completely surprised.

CG: How many on the ballot, do you remember?

RM: I think there were seven of us. I think there were seven on there.

CG: But it's still a majority in both orders, right?

RM: A majority in both orders, yes sir. We did our third ballot and took a lunch break, and during the lunch the bishop came to me and said, "When you come back from the lunch, I want you to come up on the dais and sit beside me.

CG: And you thought, "Uh-oh."

RM: Uh-oh. [Laughs]

CG: [Laughs] That was a clue.

RM: That was a clue. So, then I went to work for the diocese in January of '97.

CG: Right. You were there ten years, right?

RM: I was there ten years. Consecrated on April the 12th, 1997. One of my co-consecrators was Charles Bennison. I'm number 928 in the American succession; he was 927.

CG: Yeah, because he had just been done here.

RM: Right, that's right. In fact, I came to his consecration to get ideas. And again, the Diocese of Long Island had been—the clergy were suffering because they had not really had a pastor, and they had no one to talk to and they had trauma.

CG: And that's one of the chief jobs of a bishop, isn't it?

RM: Absolutely, absolutely right.

CG: To be the pastor for the clergy.

RM: So I asked to have my office in another building, the old bishop's residence on the grounds of the Diocesan Center, so the clergy could come and go without being seen from the other bishop's office, because I knew they were hurting. And did what a bishop does, confirmations, and a lot of pastoral work. And the diocese got healthier, the bishop got a bit healthier, but the canon, who was not elected, was still very—he was really the power behind the throne, and advised the bishop heavily, and actually even, I think, encouraged the bishop's illness with alcohol. So, but I just hunkered down and kept on going.

CG: Did your part of the job.

RM: Did my part of the job, and loved it. I loved what I did as bishop suffragan, and during those years I served as the chairman of the NEAC [the National Episcopal Aids Coalition].

CG: N-E-A-C?

RM: NEAC and AIDS commission of the National Church. I became the chairman of the House of Bishops Committee on Religious Communities. So, and I found the community of the House of Bishops to be a very nurturing and caring group as well. And then about 2006, I think, I went to Credo, and then I went to a pension fund—like a retreat, which we have had here, and every diocese has them, where pension people talk to clergy and say, "You know, here's a prognosis of your future financially, and your pension." And I found that I was beginning to get—that I was beginning not to suffer fools kindly, and I thought—

CG: Well, that's the Midwestern in you, right?

RM: "Maybe you're getting burned out."

CG: And ten years again, that's the magic number, isn't it?

RM: Yeah, that is. Then I also felt that perhaps I was enabling the diocesan, because things had gotten to a stage where he might call me on a Saturday morning and say, "I'm not feeling well today. Can you do an ordination in two hours?" And I was happy to do it, but.

CG: But that's an enabling thing.

RM: That's an enabling kind of thing. So in 2007, I retired.

CG: What have you done since? What did you do before you—?

RM: Well, we moved to Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

CG: Interesting. Why Ephrata?

RM: Strangely—

CG: Because I went to Franklin and Marshall.

RM: Oh, did you really?

CG: Yeah. Graduated in '65, because as I told you on the phone. I'm three weeks older than you are, so you've got to be respectful here.

RM: [Laughs]

CG: You're about to have a birthday. Happy birthday, four days from now.

RM: Thank you Clark, yes.

CG: Three days from now.

RM: Yes. We looked in Maryland for a place to live, but the housing market there at the time was almost as pricy as Long Island. Long Island was out of the question. I had not been a very good steward of my—

CG: It's awfully expensive.

RM: —of resources, so we had always lived in parish or diocesan housing. And some friends of ours who had lived in Long Island for three generations moved to East Earl, Pennsylvania, down by Honeybrook, and they invited us over, and we went several times. Thought the countryside looked kind of like home. We were ready to get out of busy Long Island, the traffic, and people, and everything. So, we purchased a house there in Ephrata and moved. I think we moved in the late fall, and by February of 2007 I was helping the diocese of Georgia as an assisting bishop. They have a lot of small, rural congregations and parishes, and so I went to work with Henry Louttit, who was the bishop.

CG: Spell that for me?

RM: L-O-U-T-T-I-T.

CG: Okay.

RM: His father had been bishop of one of the Florida dioceses before, when the state was broken up. Anyway, I loved those winters in Savannah. I think I spent three winters there.

CG: A little different from North Dakota, huh?

RM: Very different from North Dakota, and interesting, fascinating, because oftentimes I was going to visit parishes in the Piney Woods, or the peanut country, and totally different from Nebraska and North Dakota, both. After two winters, the bishop of Georgia decided it was time for him to retire, or at least announce his retirement, and get ready for an election. So I came back home in the early spring, and my friend John Raab, R-A-A-B, who was the suffragan of Maryland, and was the interim bishop, because the bishop diocesan had retired, and he went into the hospital for sort of a routine surgery, and had complications. So Michael Creighton, C-R-E-I-G-H-T-O-N, who was the bishop of central Pennsylvania, was newly retired, so he and I sort of pitched in and helped the diocese.

CG: Helped in Maryland. They could use your help now, but that's another story.

RM: Oh, isn't that true? Terrible. So I was there for maybe six months, and I went to the consecration of the bishop of Maryland, Eugene Sutton, S-U-T-T-O-N.

CG: Right.

RM: And met Allen Bartlett. And Allen said, "Well, what are you doing these days?" And I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I'm just finishing up some work. I was helping out here while John Raab was the acting bishop, and now that they have a new diocesan, my work is finished. And he said, "Well, we could use some help."

CG: Allen was the assisting bishop at that point?

RM: Allen was acting as the assisting bishop, so he said, "Would you do a few visitations a month for us?" And I said, "Sure. I don't live far

from the diocese." So I started—that was in November, I believe, when I started, and I did three or four visitations. I had interviewed with the standing committee for the position of assisting bishop, small A. And then in January, January or February of 2009—

CG: '09?

RM: The standing committee asked me to come to a meeting [where they] asked if I would consider serving as the capital A Assisting bishop, because Allen—

CG: Allen wanted to pull back again.

RM: Yes. So, I thought that sounded interesting. It was not that far from Ephrata, although I didn't realize at the time that I would have to drive on the Schuylkill.

CG: The Surekill Crawlway?

RM: Yes, so commuting quickly became not an option. At any rate, long story short, they invited me to come and serve as the assisting bishop. And I started in, officially started in April. Had an apartment down in Queen Village right on Christian Street, and Number 1 Christian Street was my address.

CG: What a great address.

RM: It was a good address.

CG: Particularly for a bishop.

RM: And a nice apartment in a good neighborhood, right across the street from Gloria Dei Church. On Mother's Day, 2009, I had had a visitation at Old Christ Church, and then I was driving home with some friends, actually, who had flown into Philadelphia, and we were going up to Ephrata to have dinner and spend the afternoon. When I arrived home about 2 o'clock, I discovered that my dog Farley was

still in the family room at the house, and no one was about. So I went, called and called, and when I went upstairs and found that my wife had died in the night, totally unexpectedly.

CG: Horrible way to start your job here.

RM: It was, oh gosh, it was awful. So we went through the funeral, and I have four children, and of course I called them all and they came, and then I just moved to Philadelphia, basically permanently.

CG: Did you sell the house in Ephrata after that?

RM: I put the house on the market.

CG: Of course, it was a lousy time.

RM: The worst time in history for me to sell the house.

CG: To sell the house, yeah.

RM: But the dog became a city dog instead of a country dog.

CG: He seems to do okay. He adapts pretty well.

RM: He adapts very well. And so I threw myself into the work here. I really was a little foolish. I would work sometimes ten hours a day.

CG: That's all right.

RM: Because I didn't have any—I only had my dog to go home to, and that was my way of coping.

CG: Sure. Now, let's go back before your sadness. There are a lot of people who knew of you before you came here, and viewed you as pastoral, a really good guy, and so it was not surprising that you would be willing to come in and be pastoral, and work with whatnot, with the various parishes, and people who are hurting. But there are others who said, "What in the name of Sam Hill possessed him to come into this mess?"

RM: [Laughs]

CG: What was it about—I mean, you and Charles were friends; we knew that. We didn't know that, but I know that now from what you've said.

RM: Sure.

CG: But Charles was not a factor in your coming here?

RM: No, he certainly wasn't.

CG: Why did you do it?

RM: I had heard the woes of Charles and the diocese, because we're in the same class, and every time, at the House of Bishops or General Convention, every time we got together, our class would always have a dinner and sort of share our stories.

CG: Sure.

RM: So I had some inkling of the situation. Obviously, I didn't know all of the facts. But I was interested in considering the position, and then took the position, because I saw a lot of pain here and felt that, again, my gifts as a pastor could be helpful, just in helping people get back up on their feet and go on, and be the church, which they needed to do, because it seemed to just be struggling. And frankly, I had not done too well with retirement.

CG: Oh, you flunked retirement?

RM: I flunked retirement several times, actually. After about a year or two in Ephrata one morning I woke up and said, "I don't know if I can stand to be here, and hear the clip-clop of these horses and carriages anymore."

CG: [Laughs]

RM: "This was a mistake. I need to be—we need to be in the city."

CG: Okay, so when you came here, there are several things that I want to explore a little bit. First of all, you came as a bishop, but as a suffragan you had never had full authority, so the fact that the standing committee had the ecclesiastical authority, which members of the standing committee would say at every possible moment—

RM: Never forget.

CG: They never let anybody forget it.

RM: No, no.

CG: What was it like? Let me try to phrase this more concisely. How did it work, you being basically somebody to go out and do episcopal things, and not having any authority? Or did you have authority? How did that work, and [what] was the relationship like with the standing committee?

RM: Curiously. That's a good question. Let me just make a quick call.

CG: Okay.

RM: If you want to stop your machine. [Pause in recording] Even the standing committee, they too wanted a pastor, but they had this tug of war because frankly, I think Glenn and the—

CG: Glenn Matis.

RM: Glenn Matis, and then Bishop Matthews, who was sort of their advisor from the presiding bishop's office, kept reminding everyone about their—

CG: Being in charge.

RM: They were the ecclesiastical authority. So I ministered to the standing committee just like I ministered to everyone else, basically by saying, "You can trust me. I'm not going to betray your trust. I'm not going

to hurt you. I'm here to help you, so that together we can do the work of the Lord."

CG: What did you find when you got here in terms of—what do you think the basic issues were when you arrived?

RM: Well, the standing committee told me that one of the basic issues that they saw was that the office staff was totally afloat. They were hurt; they were confused. Things were not getting done efficiently. So that's where I started, by having some regular staff meetings, and trying to encourage people on the staff, and assure them that we had a job to do and we could do it together. And then I just made myself available to the clergy, and again, there was a lot of pain. I heard many stories, as you might well imagine, about people who had been hurt, primarily by Charles. It hurts me to say that, but—

CG: Well, that was the reality.

RM: —he could be difficult at times.

CG: Were you surprised that he got into—I mean, you had known him for a long time, I mean, going back to Seabury Western. Were you surprised that he got himself into such a pickle?

RM: Frankly—

CG: Let me rephrase, that he got into such a pickle?

RM: I was and I wasn't. I was surprised because, as I knew him I thought he was sort of bright enough—

CG: Yeah.

RM: —and caring enough not to do that. But I also learned very quickly that he sort of felt that he had this divine right, that God had called him to be the bishop of Pennsylvania, and nothing was going to stop him from doing that.

CG: Do you think that some of that may have been genetic, because his father was [a bishop]?

RM: That's exactly the other piece. I had known his father, who was on the board at Seabury.

CG: Yes, because he was the bishop of Western Michigan, where our friend Edward Lee—

RM: That's right.

CG: —ultimately took over.

RM: He took over. And Charles Bennison, Sr., could be very difficult.

CG: I gather extremely so.

RM: Yeah, so Charles was—he had modeled too much, I'm afraid, from his father.

CG: Edward Lee described to me the other day, when we were talking on the phone, that Bennison Sr. was a bully.

RM: Mm-hm.

CG: And that any of us that knows Charles Bennison Jr. knows that that's not the case, but that he will listen, and then go out and do exactly what he wants, and so he's sort of passive-aggressive.

RM: Yes.

CG: Do you think that was in reaction to his father—still powerful, but without the nasty edge?

RM: Probably.

CG: Because I don't think Charles has that nasty edge.

RM: No, he doesn't; he doesn't. After Charles returned, I could see his lack of that nasty edge.

CG: But still, he would do what he wanted to do.

RM: But some of the horror stories that I heard were just—I mean, Charles had a bad habit of—I think he didn't need a lot of sleep, and he would call people in the middle of the night, clergy and others, and harass them. I mean, not just harassment, but whatever they might be working on, he made people crazed by that. I mean, I've heard so many stories of him calling at midnight or 2 o'clock in the morning.

CG: Yeah. Do you think there was—okay, so that's Charles' piece. And we can all make determinations of how he could have behaved differently, or acted differently, but what about the standing committee? There was plenty of blame to go around—

RM: There was.

CG: —from my outside point of view, it looked at least.

RM: Yeah, and the standing committee, especially the leadership of it, was just so—they had these red flags and when they would hear certain words or see the flag waving, they would just get extremely difficult. And we had some set-tos. As the assisting bishop, for instance, I did not have access to the Nunns Fund.

CG: Which is what?

RM: Which is a very large endowment given to the diocese by a woman whose last name was Nunn.

CG: Oh, okay.

RM: I think it throws off about a half a million dollars a year.

CG: That's a big fund.

RM: In interest.

CG: That's a big fund.

RM: That's a big fund, and only the bishop has call on it. Well, of course, the standing committee had call on it during the interregnum, and I

would try to make, I thought, wise or helpful suggestions of how they might use some of the money, and they guarded that with—that was really the final thing. That's when they made it known to me that they were the ecclesiastical authority. And then we had a couple of other things where the treasurer at the time, Joe Suprenik.

CG: Do you remember how to spell his name?

RM: Yes, S-U-P-R-E-N-A-K, I think, Suprenak, maybe N-I-K.

CG: I think it was, yes.

RM: He wanted more power, and for some odd reason, I had to sign a paper giving it, and I simply would not do that. And so we had some friction there, and challenge.

CG: What do you think was the—you were around, and you were also watching this as a member of the house of bishops, and seeing things develop in Pennsylvania over a period of time. What do you think the principal issue was? They ultimately brought back this 30-year-old issue about Bennison and his brother, which seemed to me that they were reaching, because wasn't it the financial thing that was really driving it? And then they didn't have a leg to stand on with that, according to the headquarters and the legal people.

RM: Yes.

CG: So they went and found something else. Is that an accurate description of how that happened?

RM: I think that's very accurate, Clark. I believe that the trust between the standing committee and the bishop had eroded, and the standing committee just couldn't trust the bishop any more, and really thought that he had sort of gone off at least one rail.

CG: Was it power—was it all about power?

RM: Yes. It was a lot about power, but I think that they had had—Bill Wood, who had been president of the standing committee—

CG: Whom I'm going to interview next week.

RM: —was a dear friend and supporter of Charles in the beginning, and then I think Charles betrayed his trust. But Bill was a gentleman.

CG: Well, he stepped down as president of the standing committee because he didn't want to lead the charge.

RM: That's right. But Glenn was like a bulldog with a bone. He loved to fight, so he was in there leading the charge all the time. So I think that the trust had eroded. They had this whole Wapiti Camp furor, and so there were some financial challenges and questions. But I could never learn where this charge from California came from. Some on the standing committee actually talked about it like, "The Lord delivered us, and this just appeared out of the ethers," about Charles' brother, and then they knew they had it. They knew, or thought, they had him.

CG: Well, and they did, except for the statute of limitations, according to the appeals court.

RM: That's right, yes.

CG: Did you think that he should have been—this is, I'm asking for your personal opinion.

RM: Mm-hm.

CG: Do you think that he should have been defrocked?

RM: I think it he should have resigned, as I have heard, at least, that the offer was made with a bit of a parachute several times.

CG: By both presiding bishops.

RM: Yes.

CG: Griswold and Jefferts Schori.

RM: He really should have resigned, just for his—I always wondered how he and his wife could abide the constant bickering and spotlight, and the fact that people really, really disliked them. I mean, it was just—

CG: One of the things that I understood was that he wanted to come back because *This Far By Faith*, the book, was not going to be published by the standing committee because it was Chuck's book.

RM: Right.

CG: And even though it wasn't.

RM: Mm, no.

CG: He kept his hands off it. He was a history major; he knew how it worked.

RM: Sure.

CG: And he wanted to get that published, so he came back for that, and he also had work to be done. But it does seem that he had many opportunities to save himself and the diocese, and he took none of them

RM: He took none of them. That was the sadness for me.

CG: And yet he could be very one-on-one; he could be very pastoral.

RM: Oh, he could. I cared about him as a friend, and I just, we never had the kind of relationship where I could sit down with him one-on-one and say, "Chuck."

CG: And say, "Just do it."

RM: "Give it up, and let it go."

CG: Yeah.

RM: But while I was the [bells ring] while I was the acting bishop or the assistant, after about six months, early on the standing committee gave

me the proof of the book, and said, "In your off hours, read this." Well, [laugh] I put it in a drawer and picked through it, but I began to say to people in standing committee, "I'm praying for an angel, someone to give us," I can't remember what the figure was. It seems like $50,000.

CG: Whatever it was.

RM: To get the book published. I said, "We need to clean up some of the unfinished business." Oh, that was just like—[laughs]

CG: Did they explode?

RM: Yeah, right. It was like walking to the noose. They just could not tolerate that.

CG: Yeah. Then he came back.

RM: Mm-hm.

CG: What was it like in Church House when the Episcopal authority was the diocesan bishop? Was it different?

RM: It was different.

CG: Because you stayed, and you didn't have to.

RM: That's right.

CG: Although you had moved down here and whatnot, but.

RM: Yeah, he invited me to stay, and one of the things that the standing committee had told me when I first started was how broken the staff was. And I understood from staff members that there was hardly ever a staff meeting without at least one staff member leaving in tears. He could just—Charles, that was in the early days—could just be cruel to people. So we had built up a good rapport, and we had a good, solid team of staff folks, and I was on vacation when we got the call that Charles would be returning.

CG: It was in August, yeah.

RM: It was in August. And so I came back. We had a staff meeting. I said, "Look, folks, we've got a job to do. Let's hang together." And they really did. I think Charles' attitude was different when he returned, with the staff.

CG: Do you think he was chastened a little bit?

RM: I think he may have heard that that was one of the areas of difficulty, and that he could get more, much more, done if he had the staff behind him than struggling against him. So the staff really did very well. There was not a whole lot of angst when Charles returned. Everybody had their job, and they just kept right on doing it.

CG: Do you think they thought it was going to be for a short period, and that he was going to retire?

RM: I never heard that.

CG: Because a lot of people were saying, "When he comes back in August, run the thing through the end of the year, and then resign." And the House of Bishops called for his resignation.

RM: That's right.

CG: I think the presiding bishop gave him another opportunity to back out, after he was uninhibited.

RM: Yes.

CG: He's a very complicated person, isn't he?

RM: Oh, very. Extremely complicated, very complicated.

CG: Your relationship with him remained solid?

RM: My relationship remained solid. We had regular meetings together, and unlike my professional time as a suffragan—because one of the sadnesses for me there was here I was a bishop ready and available to

help, and the diocesan in Long Island never consulted me, never asked for my opinion, because he had this canon to the ordinary. Charles would call me and ask for my—we could do collaborative things.

CG: Who else was involved doing Episcopal things at that point? Was Allen?

RM: Edward was still doing things.

CG: Edward Lee?

RM: Edward Lee. And Allen was involved with the Diocesan Consultation Team.

CG: And he was working in Washington, wasn't he?

RM: Yes, he was.

CG: Was Frank Turner still well enough to work?

RM: Frank was still doing visitations, two a month, and Edward Lee two a month, and I was pretty much doing visitations every Sunday.

CG: Are you still?

RM: I'm now doing two a month, so.

CG: With Bishop Dan?

RM: With Bishop Dan.

CG: I know Edward is, too.

RM: Yes, Edward does that. And helping out, like the 14th of February, a priest by the name of Robert Keel died.

CG: Yes, I saw that.

RM: And his funeral is that day and Dan is not available, so I am going to take the funeral. And I am very happy to do situations like that.

CG: What else are you doing in your retirement?

RM: Well since I moved here in June, I'm really finally—

CG: Walking Farley a lot.

RM: —[laughs] walking Farley! I'm finally enjoying retirement. I'm doing some reading, and someday I hope to do a little bit of writing. I think I'll write a novel before I'll do anything. [Laughs] I've been collecting stories for the 44 years that I have been—now 45 years that I have been ordained. So I'm just enjoying, and many, I think, others would tell you, too, being a retired Episcopal bishop is a pretty nice place to be, because there are always things to do, but being retired, we don't have to go to standing committee meetings.

CG: You don't have to go to House of Bishops meetings.

RM: Or House of Bishops meetings, or even General Convention. I am going because I want to help elect the next presiding bishop.

CG: And that's what the retired bishops can still do, right?

RM: We can still do that.

CG: It's one of the things you can still vote for.

RM: Yes, that's right. Excuse me one second.

CG: Sure. [Pause in recording]

RM: —insights that I would share. When I came, I provided opportunities for the clergy at least to sort of share their wounded-ness. And I can't even remember now if it was deanery meetings, but a lot of clergy needed just to stand up and tell how Charles Bennison had hurt them.

CG: Just to vent.

RM: To vent, and we did a lot of that. And I think, I believe the clergy really began to get healthy. They found out they could trust a bishop again, and so forth. Once Charles resigned—

CG: And that was still under pressure a little bit, I know.

RM: Yes, it was.

CG: It was the canon that was—

RM: The canon had changed.

CG: Right.

RM: I never heard all of the inside stories there, because the standing committee was very careful and cautious.

CG: What I had heard was that if he didn't resign, they were going to institute the new process.

RM: Yes, they were. So, and then once he resigned, the diocese got another consultant in, and we've been going through this "share your hurts" again. I'm not a consultant in that area, but I think you have to begin to move out of that. You can't just keep wallowing in the pain. Share your pain, and then move on. If you just—they're still providing opportunities for people to come and share their pain.

CG: Well at some point, you just have to say—

RM: At some point you have to just say, that was painful.

CG: That was that.

RM: That was painful, but we're moving on now, and I'm still alive and I'm still ordained, and whatever.

CG: It's not just clergy, too.

RM: No, many lay people as well. So I hope that we will finally get beyond that, and get it done before a new diocesan is elected, so that the new diocesan can begin to build again. If the diocesan hasn't—

CG: Do you think the diocese is healthy enough to do that?

RM: I think they're clearly much healthier, but the danger will be that if the new diocesan comes on board and is advised to work through the pain, we could be at this for a long time.

CG: That's what Daniel's job has been.

RM: Daniel's job has been, and he has done a fine job.

CG: Oh, he's terrific.

RM: And he's like a comfortable shoe, you know. He doesn't come at people like Charles used to, in a strong manner. He sort of meets people where they are, and they've discovered that he's here to help the diocese and to build, and it's happening even in front of our eyes. But we have to move on.

CG: Let's get away—I've got one more thing to do, one more thing that I meant to ask you earlier. Your priesthood and Episcopacy has moved through a period of extraordinary change in the church—new prayer book, God help us, women.

RM: Women's ordination, yup.

CG: Gays in the church.

RM: Mm-hm.

CG: All of those things. You've come from a relatively conservative part of the country. You were certainly in a conservative diocese in Long Island. How have you viewed these changes, and were you comfortable with them as they happened, or did it take you some time to adjust to women and—?

RM: It did take me some time. As a young priest, I was very conservative, and my argument against the ordination of women was that it would endanger our ecumenical standing with other ancient parts of the church, like Orthodoxy and Catholic.

CG: And Rome.

RM: And frankly, I came [laughs]—I came to accept the ordination of women in quite a—Nebraska was not ordaining women when I left there, but North Dakota was, and our parish was hosting a—the bishop up there had a class for deacons, and it would move around to

different parishes. And my parish was hosting, and so the bishop asked me to concelebrate. And I got into the sacristy and there was a woman priest that I had known, but we went to the altar together, and that was my—

CG: The world didn't come to an end.

RM: Yeah. [Laughs] No, the world didn't come to an end. So then I began to be more open to that, and so really, the gifts that women bring to ministry, and to the larger kind of—and probably also came to a bit of realization that, while ecumenicity is still important, there are always going to be little—there are always going to be other factors that will keep the church from being one again, and women, ordaining women in itself, was not going to be the only factor. The prayer book I didn't have difficulty with, because I believe that the new prayer book helped the church to become more catholic-minded, as a Eucharistic church.

CG: Right.

RM: And basically, I don't think there are many places anymore in the church that have Morning Prayer with great regularity. I know there are a few in this diocese. And there are things about Morning Prayer that are beautiful, the canticles, but we are really much more of a Eucharistic church.

CG: And Morning Prayer is for [weekdays] .

RM: Right. And the 1979 prayer book really helped that. Once I then accepted women's ordination, I became a champion for the ordination of gays and other folks.

CG: So you were not shocked or bothered by Gene Robinson?

RM: I was not. I was actually a supporter. Strangely enough, I came out at age 68, after my wife had been dead a few years. I did a lot of soul-searching, and could finally say to myself, "You are a bisexual person, and it's your turn now. If you want to explore your life as a gay person, it's about time you got on with it."

CG: Yeah. I thought what was the most interesting thing to me about all of that, and I too am gay—the most interesting thing to me about that was that when Gene Robinson was elected, and basically all hell broke loose all over the Anglican Communion.

RM: Indeed it did.

CG: Then my old friend Mary Glasspool, who started at Saint Paul's Chestnut Hill—

RM: Did she?

CG: —got elected, as an openly partnered gay priest, as suffragan in Los Angeles, and there wasn't a ripple.

RM: No, exactly.

CG: Not a ripple!

RM: Exactly, yeah.

CG: You know, there was Barbara Harris, and then there was everybody else.

RM: Mm-hm.

CG: It's the same kind of thing.

RM: Yes.

CG: And of course Barbara, again, was from this part of the world.

RM: Right.

CG: The diocese of Pennsylvania has sent a lot off a lot of—

RM: We really—indeed we have.

CG: And Barbara will tell you in no uncertain terms what she thinks, as I understand it. I mean, I did an interview with her for this.

RM: Uh-huh.

CG: But I have known her for a little while. The fact that her candor is one of the joys of the Episcopal Church! [Laughs]

RM: [Laughs] It is!

CG: It's no-nonsense.

RM: No, none at all. [Laughs]

CG: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your time as the assisting bishop?

RM: No. While I may have brought gifts to the diocese, serving as Assisting Bishop was a gift to me, because I really got to do many episcopal things that I had not been able to do as a suffragan, administering the diocese, and helping pull a staff together and develop some new—one of the things that I can say with humble pride is that I helped the Diocese of Pennsylvania realize that the ministry of the diaconate was something that should be lived out here. Because Charles insisted that deacons do a three-year seminary course, and spend 60 or 80 thousand dollars for a job that was non-stipendiary.

CG: Yeah. These are for the vocational diaconate.

RM: Vocational diaconate. So I convinced the commission on ministry and the standing committee to explore developing a program of education or formation, which is operational. We now have twice the number of deacons active in the diocese as when I came to the diocese, and I believe that that's one of the trends, or one of the new ways of being [a] church that every diocese is having to explore these

days. Not that vocational deacons are doing priestly ministry, but there is a lot of ministry that deacons can and should be doing, and now are doing.

CG: And with so many parishes having financial problems—

RM: Oh, yes.

CG: —a non-stipendiary thing is probably a very welcome.

RM: Very, absolutely. That was one of the areas that I was moving in when Charles returned. I had interviewed a number of, actually, Roman Catholic priests who wanted to become Episcopal priests. Almost the first thing I said to them was, "We don't really have many full-time positions open, but if you would be willing to consider continuing with your secular work—

CG: As tentmakers, yeah.

RM: —tentmakers, we have parishes with housing that they can offer as part of your compensation, and certainly parishes who could afford you on a non-stipendiary basis." And I had two or three in sort of in the pipeline and then that all changed. But that was a very popular concept when I was in seminary, tentmaking ministry. And I see it and hear it coming back into the life of the church.

CG: And when you're in a smaller diocese it was vital, because you were going to three churches.

RM: Absolutely.

CG: Yeah. All right, let's stop for now.

RM: I appreciate this opportunity to vent a bit, and reflect on the years here that I spent in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, because the great gift to me was that I really got to be bishop, and do all of the administrative things, as well as—there are headaches and heartaches with it. And I

had those as a suffragan, but serving almost—almost as a diocesan was a real gift, because I got to be a bishop, in the fuller sense than I had been before.

CG: Good. Thank you.

[End of Interview]