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Interview with Reverend H. Kris Ronnow

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Transcription
Interview with Reverend H Kris Ronnow

Sarah Moore

Reverend H Kris Ronnow

SM: Okay. So my name is Sarah Moore. If you could please state your full name
KR: Kris Ronnow.
SM: Alright. The date of this interview is May 1st, 2015. It is taking place at the
Columbia College Library at 624 South Michigan. This interview is part of the Columbia
College Chicago Archives and Honors Oral History Project Chicago 68! That is part of
collaboration with the Counsel of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. So what’s
your year of birth?
KR: Year of birth?
SM: Year of birth.
KR: I was born on [REDACTED] in 1937.
SM: Place of birth?
SM: Where were you raised?
SM: Where was your father’s place of birth?
KR: Chicago
SM: Your mother’s place of birth?
KR: Saint Paul, Minnesota
SM: Great. Alright. So first question. Who did you live with growing up?
KR: My parents. Lived at home through four years of college. And when I went off to
graduate school I moved out and came to Chicago.
SM: What was your favorite toy to play with growing up?
KR: I had a red fire engine that I was able to push around. And then to keep things
neutral or nondiscriminatory I also had a baby buggy. I use to take the baby buggy up and
down the street and this is not something that a boy would necessarily do, but my
parents—At least my sisters tease me about it.
SM: Great. So when was the first time you defied your parents?
KR: (Deep breath) That’s a little—defied them. I think when I was out playing with guys
on the street. I was about five or six years old. I got into a fight with my best friend. And
my mother was gassed that I had been violating what she had always said to be kind to
your neighbors and closer to your friends and I had disappointed her.
SM: So how was religion observed in your home?
KR: Life long Presbyterians and I was baptized at a Presbyterian church in Saint Paul.
My folks attended the Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church. Moved to Lexington Avenue
Presbyterian Church. Moved to Macalaster Presbyterian Church where they had their
membership until they died.
SM: What were you taught to survive a nuclear war?
KR: It was not a concept that was even on the plate because nuclear war was not
anything of common knowledge as we were growing up. The first turmoil that I was
aware of was during the Second World War and the bombing Hiroshima and that was just
sort of mind boggling because how can people destroy one another in that fashion. Then
the best memory I have of the Second World War was VE Day when we all piled into my
dad's old car and drove around downtown Saint Paul with a parade put together of people celebrating, honking horns and blowing bells and whistles. That was the positive side of the war end that was not the negative of nuclear.

SM: So when did you feel yourself as different from your peers?

KR: During grade school I found myself not being willing to get in fights and I would walk away from situations where—could potentially be for turmoil. I then during high school never engaged in any contact sports. I played tennis, I swam, I played in a band, I sang in the choir, so I think I was fairly well socialized in doing things. I avoided football. Swimming is competitive, but it is not a contact sport. And I just had an avoidance of contact sports.

SM: So how did your relationship to religion change during high school?

KR: It didn’t. I grew up—baptized as an infant, but then went to Sunday school during grade school and high school. Active in the youth groups. And did projects with the high school crowd and many of which were sponsored by the church and we were engaged in activities so there was a gradual emerging and growing and strengthening of that.

SM: So what were your aspirations when you graduated high school?

KR: I had gone to college with the anticipation that I would want to be a director of a hospital. I had—I worked as an orderly during college—well back up a little bit. During high school, I was a counselor at a YMCA Summer camp and I really enjoyed working with the kids and being a counselor. For two years I was a counselor, for a year I was the field trip supervisor and the last year program supervisor and it was just a lovely way to spend the Summer. I could work on my tan and do a fairly decent um outside activities. I had to have a heavy job during the school year when I was in high school. Started out with paper routes and then stock boy in a grocery store and that kept me in money and that enabled me to save up enough money so I could buy my first car and that was a major accomplishment even though I was a junior. And I wanted my own wheels. But working at the YMCA camp pushed me in the direction of spiritual formation if you want to use that term. We had chapel at the YMCA facility which was still Young Man’s Christian Association. Christian Association I think has sort of dwindled with the Y at least from what I see of it now. At that point it was a fairly strong part of the program and respect for nature, respect for the earth, respect for one another, respect for our differences that sort of got wrapped up together. So anyway I got into college and majored in economics thinking I was going to go into hospital administration. The mistake I made was I started working at a hospital as an orderly. And it was good pay, my sister was nurse one the floor and I think she helped facilitate my getting a job as an orderly, but I realized during the time I was an orderly in the hospital that this was certainly nothing I wanted to do full time. Hospitals were chaotic. They’re counterproductive from my perspective as a humble. Well I was never very humble. Humble orderly. I decided I would like to do something else. Well by my junior year in college it was coming over me that I really think I thought I might like to do church, some kind of aspect of continuing church work. And I was convinced that there needed to be some strong leadership given to inner city communities. Where structures were falling apart, where schools were a mess, where kids were a mess, the family formation was a mess and so I decided to go to the seminary and while I was in seminary I decided that in
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order to really do inner city work order would have to be between social work and
ministry. I should get a masters degree in Social Work at the same time so that’s how I
got through seminary. And got my Masters in Social Work in the University of Illinois.
Fortunately, I married my first year in Graduate School. My wife got a very nice paying
job at Michael Lees(??) Hospital, so she maintained me a style to which we wanted to
become accustom until the first daughter was born two years later. She stopped working.
By then I was in some work that helped us maintain our lifestyle and it’s been like that
for fifty-five years.

SM: Great. Who was the first person you voted for?

KR: Eisenhower.

SM: What pulled you towards getting your Bachelors Degree at Macalaster?

KR: I was the first person in my family that got a college education. My parents were
deeply committed to my continuing my education because my dad had been a brick layer
all his life. My mom was a secretary for a while until she was homebound taking care of
the kids. And then she got a job as a clerk in a hosp— in a grocery store and then a clerk
at a dry-goods store. And they thought—they wanted me to have a better chance in a
profession and so it really encouraged me and pushed me in the direction of going to
college. Living at home they could support me in terms of room and board. And I could
earn enough play money to on my own take care of my ancillary expenses. And at no
point did my parents expect me to pay room and board. At no point did they expect me
to—I did chores around the house as one would expect, but I was able to work enough to
pay for a car and pay for my running expenses and have them carry me for room and
board. When I went to McCormick—I came to Chicago in 1959 to go to McCormick
Seminary and I made frequent trips back to Saint Paul on weekends because not only did
I want to see my family—at least that was the overt expression—I wanted to see my
fiancé and spend time with her on weekends so she would come to Chicago sometimes
and I would go to Saint Paul and carry on our budding romance in that fashion.

SM: So, lets see. What was the atmosphere like on the college campuses where you
attended school?

KR: I was a live at home student, so I did not have a campus experience in terms of
living on campus. Macalaster College was a small liberal arts college in Saint Paul. It was
just across the street from the church we attended. There was a long-standing relationship
between the local congregation and Macalaster College. When—as a church related
college, it was a much closer relationship with local churches. And we constantly
engaged in interactions with faculty members, we would do stuff on campus, so there was
a natural draw for me to go to Mac. I explored going away to college, but when I checked
out what the price would be and the cost would be that was not feasible. I did not want to
go to the University of Minnesota because of the size. My high school class had 1100
students in it just our class, so 4400 student body. It was a big school. And there was
opportunities of getting lost in a big unit like that. So I wanted to go to Macalaster and it
was a very open affirming—Macalaster was the first college that flew the United Nations
flag. It was a peace oriented, inclusive, community. My high school was integrated or I
really should say my high school was desegregated. There were people—there were
blacks, there were whites. But we lived in distinctly different sections of towns and so
many of our social structures reflected where we lived. And so when I got to Macalaster
which was far more open and affirming of everybody—it had a strong international base
and there were a lot of international students who at first to me were exotic. This was a
new perspective. They had a different world view and they were wanting to come to have
an American experience and by their presence there we were able to have an international
experience. And that was very informative for me.

SM: What were the rules you didn’t like following?

KR: I thought it was unrealistic that my parents placed hours on me. Here I was in—in
grade school I could understand it, but as I got into high school it was already if I was
working to eleven o’clock and didn’t get home ‘til 11:30 it wasn’t alright for me to hang
with somebody or with a group on the street. I needed to be home. I thought that was silly
because I’m not going to do anything wrong and I never did anything wrong that I can
remember or that I choose to remember. I’m sure there were times when my parents were
frustrated with me, but I was the youngest child. My sisters kept teasing me all through—
and have to this day—that I got away with everything because I was the boy of the family
and I was the youngest of the family. And they had worn down my parents so that they
became more tolerant of my having a lighter load of restrictions placed on me. I think—I
was left home alone for a trip that my parents took to California. And I remember there
was a new car sitting in the garage and my dad said do not touch the car, leave it in the
garage. And, of course, I was smarter than him so I took it out to wash it. And in washing
it I decided I need to air dry it, so I started driving around the neighborhood. It was a
souped up—to me—it was a souped up Oldsmobile ’88 and I got up to a stop sign and
somebody came up next to me and gone and said do you want to drag race. And, of
course, it is hard to pass up that opportunity. Light changed and we started out and out of
the corner of my eye I saw a person making a left turn in front of me and I slammed on
the breaks and avoided the collision. I took that car back to the garage, put it in the
garage, didn’t touch it again and it took me a number of years before I could tell my
parents about it because clearly I was in the wrong. But it was an ah-ha moment that—
don’t put yourself in situations where you’re going to compromise what you’ve been told
to do. And so that was a good experience in retrospect.

SM: So could you describe the moment when you knew you wanted to become a priest?

KR: Probably my junior year at Macalaster, during your junior year of college. I had
dated a girl all through high school and when I decided to go to seminary I was now in
college she said oh I’ll be a good ministers wife. I thought, I don’t think so. I don’t see
her in that role and that by focusing on her role I was able to say, well what is my role?
And then in my junior year in college I became reacquainted with somebody I had been
in high school with. And she was really transformative for me as we developed a
relationship, as we developed a faith journey. And during high—junior and senior year of
high school I became very active in the Students Religious Group on campus. I was Chair
of the Religion and Life week on campus in my senior year. It was very clear at that point
that I was going to go into seminary and I had decided that I had really wanted to serve
an inner city church. That there were people who were hurting, do not come from money
by any means, but attraction to serving for ________(??) that I could support myself and
my family. It was a higher calling then say getting to an affluent church in Naperville
or—the ______(??) community of Naperville or Evanston. I wanted to go into the city
work.

SM: What was the congregation like in these inner city churches? What was the
KR: Most of them were at least tangibly or somewhat desegregated—integrated—and bi-
racial. We had congregations that were predominately black or predominately white and
historically it’s been very difficult to mix the two worship styles. That the Presbyterians
had a number of churches in the inner city where they were struggling with low income,
low education experience, low resource families, were really struggling to put it together
and keep it together. And it appealed to me that I am a person who has had some really
fine experiences and opportunities. And what can I do to help improve that life for folk.

And when I got to seminary I took courses that were focusing on urban affairs and
decided that this is really where I want to work. And so after seminary I was sent to look
for an inner city church. And where I could practice both the values and the methodology
that I gained both in the seminary and in social work school. The president of the
seminary at that point said that I could always pastor a church, why don’t I take this job
and do community organizing in the city? And that was intriguing to me because I had
worked during the seminary in some community organizations on the South side and the
North West side and found the kind of power that comes together by people working
together and being organized and then I got familiarized with Saul Alinski and the
Industrial Areas Foundation. That was a strong po—potent organizing effort and Saul had
a way of antagonizing all the powers that be and that was intriguing to me. We can push
buttons to get the city to be more responsive. That’s exciting. As a bi-line on that one of
my seminary professors suggested to me that I go be the Social Welfare Consultant for
the state of South Korea. And I thought that’s sort of interesting, but as my wife and I
talked about it, thought that what would it be like to be in Korea. We had never traveled
internationally. Um and I found out that the salary for my working full time would be less
than what a round trip air fair is from Chicago to Korea. I thought, what if something
happens with my parents or her parent and we need to come home and wouldn’t have the
money to do that? So we sort of turned that down. Plus I thought—I felt greatly
inadequate about it—how can I be the social welfare consultant to the state of South
Korea when one I can’t talk—I can’t speak Korean and I don’t think I have that broad of
skills, but doctor _________(??) was the professor who was trying to convince me to go to
Korea. He said your Masters Degree in Theology and Social Work more than
compensates for your lack of work experience and uh you would do well. I turned him
down and took the job as—with the Confederation of Churches here in Chicago.

SM: So what caused you to get your Masters Degree in Social Work?

KR: How can I have the skills to know how to organize people and serve people (paper
ruffled) in both basic human services motif as well as community organizing motif. At
that point there was not a track in Social Work school for community organizing. You
had to case group work or case work. I went into group work as a ______(??) at my first
year at Brit—at fellowship house in Bridgeport the community where Mayor Daly lived
and family still lives. It was a good experience working with kids and, I thought, but I
think I’d live something else. So by the second year I got a field placement in the North
West Community Organization working out of Emerson House, a traditional settlement
house, but I was able to do neighborhood organizing that’s where I encountered Saul
Alinski and the methodology of helping people, identify their needs, organize and
strategize as how to meet them and then carry out action programs really made a lot of
sense to me. So I was able to use my Masters Program as an effort to facilitate that kind
of organizing.
SM: And what was it like to be the Executive Director of The Interreligious Counsel on Urban Affairs?

KR: It was awesome. I started out working for the Protestants with the Church Federation. But then we form—the Interreligious Counsel of Urban Affairs had been a group that had been put together by Rabbi Robert Marx, Dave Ramage and ____ (?). Dave Ramage being the Protestant and ______ (??) the Archdiocese because we realized in working in the city neighborhoods individual churches acting alone are not going to be very effective. Combination of churches working together um can have more power and more ability to redress wrongs. When I was asked to be the first director of the Interreligious Council I thought, this is awesome. Um one I respected deeply the men that I was working with and it was all men at that point. And but it made so much sense that to deal with the powers that be that were deeply entrenched and deeply dysfunctional in many ways. Functional for a lot of stuff because the water kept flowing, the garbage kept getting filled up, but the educational system was really in bad shape. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely and we saw lots of examples of that. And to be the vehicle that helped put in shape the interreligious council so that we could be a force to do community organizing, raise money from the various denominations and to do collaborative work is far more effective then standing alone.

SM: So when did you know people were following what you were saying and that it was making an impact?

KR: When you sit and talk with people and they articulate what are the frustrations that you are dealing with and you map out an action program for what needs to be done to resolve that. Um and you successfully carry out that action people get a whole new sense of empowerment. And that citizenship means something. Very simple example often overworked is that city neighborhoods sometimes—well there is a wide range of city services in the fifty wards of the city. In some wards where the affluent had powerful voices, garbage pick up and schools and everything, but really pretty good shape. Then you got into other inner city neighborhoods where the political representation was weaker and you could not get action to get the alderman and his cohorts to do what they’re suppose to do. And so we ended up doing some block clean ups. Lets get out there and clean it up and we’ll deposit all of this garbage that we collected in front of the Alderman’s office and see how he likes that. And see how long it takes for a garbage truck to get there to pick that up. And they’d see that the garbage truck would get there to pick up the junk and the next time you called the Alderman, and you asked for your streets to be clean, far more apt to have it happen. And so it was a citizen action that was nonviolent um that got results. Educational system was a lot harder to deal with because there were so many layers of entrenchment in the school systems and the unaccountability of the principles and the teachers to the community. Organizing some demonstrations around churches, around schools, demonstrating, walking a picket line around the schools. Um at one point they brought in Willis Wagons which were portable classrooms and plunked them down and that was suppose to solve the problems. There were not—It was anti-education I mean they were not solid forms of carrying on education. And so we shut those down by presence. And this would be sitting down, laying down, whatever could stop the educational—the quote educational opportunity that was going on until it became more real and more substantial. I think one of my favorite ones that was never carried out, but was threatened. Was that we would tie up all
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the bathrooms at O'Hare Airport and have somebody—and have a group of people stand
in front of the urinals, go inside the toilets and just shut them and lock them because if
you notice patterns of behavior when people are getting off planes. A large group of
people always migrate immediately to the bathrooms. If they are shut down because they
are occupied and they are occupied for hours upon hours you get the attention of the
airport operators, hence you get the attention of the mayor and hence you get some
redress of the grievance that was being used. So it was fun.

SM: Why did you become an activist?

KR: (Pause) I don’t think I had a choice in my faith journey um we are all equal in the
eyes of god. We all deserve recognition, affirmation and opportunity. And to see people
that were mistreated, maltreated, and had roadblocks all along the line. Um it just wasn’t
fair. It was an equity question. It was a religious question. Whatever it was that my
parents did for us as we were growing up. They very definitely inculcated in us an anti-
bias, inclusive kind of perspective. Neither of my parents were particularly articulate.
They would stumble through articulating out their faith journey, but it just became wrong
to see people living in despicable conditions and others of us living in a fairly affluent
and comfortable environment. So there’s a sit—There is a situation at my high school
and when—high school seniors we were electing a homecoming king and queen and we
elected Janet _____ (??) was here name, still in touch with her. Was a very attractive,
typical Minnesotan Norwegian or Scandinavian background, very white. And
Bob _______ (??), who was the star of the football team, who was very black. And they
were our friends and thought that its clear they should become the homecoming king and
queen. Janet faced a deluge of international pressure and hate mail and demonstrations at
her house because she had the audacity to stand next to a black man and be a king and
queen. And that just didn’t make sense. There’s no logic to that. Nothing’s happening
between them other then friendship and yet those who are paranoid about that and who
are biased and prejudiced built up all sort of a perspective that this was bad. It took—the
rest of us said no that’s wrong. I mean—attacking them there—it’s our choice, we’re
exercising our right as students to elect who we want and that was a ah-hah moment. And
then you keep having ah-hah moments when you see the behavior of the police toward
black males, which is historic and we have seen enough of that this week. To remind us
of how in many instances the police are not operating as a professional manner. I’ve
never been stopped by the police, I’ve never been frisked by the police and I have friends
who have been. And it’s a demeaning, debilitating, negative and its wrong and we should
do what we can within our powers to change that.

SM: So what was your first experience as an activist?

KR: That’s hard to say because I think that we became involved—at the YMCA camp
we had a very inclusive clientele: Hispanic, black and white. And uh working with them
people would ask me, why are you spending your time at the camp? You’re not earning
that much money, but I would say yes, but I’m doing good while doing well. I mean I
was earning enough money to carry me and it was interesting to see how kids from
different backgrounds were able to come together. And from there it grew to—in my
professional life. I think the march Washington in ’63 was probably the pinnacle turning
point for me that um we were able to organize busloads of and planeloads of and carpools
to go to Washington. And it was such a good affirmative action yet so many people were
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SM: [Camera powers down] Keep going.
KR: We were happy. I was glad I had that experience. I’m sorry that I did not go to Selma. There was a group of people in Chicago who went to Selma and walked across the Pettus Bridge. I’m sorry I did not do that because that would have been another strong bench point.
SM: Mmkay. So what impact did marching alongside Martin Luther King Jr. have on you?
KR: He’s a small guy. My first reaction is that uh he was small in stature, but big in influence. And he was able to articulate and to name issues and name problems in a biblically based strong affirmation of the rights of all. And that was— lingered with me and prodded me on a long time and then when he got killed, thought this is more injustice piled upon injustice. I need to do whatever I can to counter that.
SM: How did you feel after Martin Luther King Jr.—after he left the community—after he left—after he left the community marches for open housing? How did you feel?
KR: He gave a legitimacy to the right to march. And that because we got positive responses from—we got actions from the neighborhoods we marched in and got public attention drawn to it. And the conditions of the housings and discriminatory policies were open at that point. A lot of people had denied that they exist. People who denied that they were steering going on, racial steering. People who denied there was differential treatment by banks and insurance companies in terms of whether or not they’d write policies or whether or not they’d write mortgages. We were able to build on the base of the march to do further investigation and study and demonstrate without any doubt that these discriminatory practices were going on and that they needed to change. Chicago still iz in many ways is still a very um very segregated community. It’s—the money haven’t flown of late have minimized that and those who have—people of color who have been able to obtain a financial stability have found the possibility to move into neighborhoods that previously have not been possible for them. But it’s the mass of people for whom they were warehouse in the Robert Taylor Home’s stretching down South State Street along the Dan Ryan Expressway. There were bad design and they proved to be a bad living environment and a bad investment because they all ended up being torn down. Can we do something more prudent ant positive and productive in terms of investing our money in housing and fair housing—fair housing—is one step in that direction.
SM: So when was there a time you wanted to stop being an activist?
KR: Most mornings. (Pause) Because of the frustration of pushing the rock and pushing the agenda that did not win friends and it was difficult to consistently reinforce allies. By that I mean your constantly having to justify what you are doing as terms of being the right direction with many people who were had lives of segregation and lives of separation, lives of people not having one on one relationships with people who were different from themselves. Could not comprehend why you want to do this. You’re pushing a rock up a hill. I said yes, but the hill needs to be conquered. And so we need to push that rock. And members of my extended family often felt I was putting myself in dangers way and certainly when I was on the streets during the Democratic Convention in ’68 there’s clearly—there was that potential for that personal injury or personal gains. I
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served a church on the West side of Chicago. I was—it was a changing neighborhood in which there was a lot of tension and a lot of pressure going on and I would go to work everyday and be—feel very comfortable because I knew the neighbors, I new the kids in the in the neighborhood and so I felt that there was a built in protection that they would take care of me as long as I’m taking care of them and there was a reciprocity.

SM: So what were your thoughts on the Tet Offensive?

KR: Which?


KR: Oh. (deep breath) Pick your battles and pick your battles that are your business, which are your prerogative in which you can successfully carry out. There was no reason for us to be in Vietnam. We only made matters worse. You can still see that evidence of that in terms of an aggressive military action is not the answer. I am more of a pacifist. I am an activist. I think that we should be able to sit and reason together and to figure things out and our place in the world. We are the dominate power in the world, but we are not the father of the whole thing. We don’t have to be in charge of everything and it was just one that made no sense, the same as Iraq. It was not any place that we had any business going. And nor did we—were we particularly successful in making it work.

SM: So what did you think of Lyndon B Johnson declining the nomination?

KR: I think he read the tealeaves. And felt that he would not be electable. And so it was easier to go back to Texas and enjoy the rest of his life on his ranch. One time I was flying over Texas and in the middle of no where was this huge airplane runway. I thought what’s that doing down there? I asked the stewardess what it was. Oh, it was Lyndon Johnson’s private air strip that was built with public money, so that he could commute easily from Washington to Texas. But Lyndon Johnson in some of his actions proved to be very event—significant impact—particularly in the ’64 Civil Rights Act. That he did some good stuff even though he was sometimes not—he was mis-motivated.

SM: So how did you feel after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated?

KR: One more down and how many more are we going to have before this stupidity and violence is stopped. And it continues to this day. I mean we still are killing people on the streets, shooting them in the back, diminishing people’s to good services and life. And it’s wrong. And so many of our heroes have gotten knocked down.

SM: How did you feel after Robert Kennedy was assassinated?

KR: I think the hardest one for me. The one that woke me up was when JFK—his brother—was killed. I was not surprised by Robert Kennedy’s being killed because again he was pushing that rock. And I acknowledge that I probably put myself in harms way on more than one occasion. I’ve been anti-gun all my life and I’ve never owned a gun. I don’t see the need for the gun. I think that the way in which fear of others or fear of the other has so filled people’s minds and hearts that it can erupt any place. And so I cease being surprised. I grieved and I’m sad, but um Robert Kennedy’s death, JFK’s death, totally unnecessary, but those who are marching to the beat of other drummers obviously have a different view in mind. And their world view is different then mine.

SM: So what was your opinion of Mayor Daly?

KR: I have a lasting image of him at the Democratic National Convention, beat red which he often was whenever he got excited, saying that there was nothing happening in the city. And ignoring the demonstrations right outside the hotel um or he was denying that that was happening. And I thought he’s out of touch with reality. Now his reality was
his own power structure that he controlled the way people breathed and ate and slept and were housed. He was a dictator and the dictator was falling apart. And the face—scene of him at the convention beat red when people were starting to castigate the city. For everything that was going on in the streets was a moment of slight satisfaction.

SM: So what did you think of the men chasing the Democratic nomination at the convention?

KR: Chasing it? You mean those who—

SM: Well that were running.

KR: Good luck. You know I—because I think that (clears throat) the more people that are in the game I think enhances the game of putting together city life, um putting together a coherent challenge to the powers that be and the need to constantly keep that wheel going. So the more the merrier. The more that come in. I think if I could contemporize that I think Bernie Sanders just announcing his run for the Democratic slot for president is a great thing. I just don’t know how many people will vote for a 78 year old man or 73 whatever. He is in his 70s. But it counterbalances to Hilary um and it counterbalances the women in Massachusetts um who—blocking her name right now—but um I think that the more the merrier. I think that one of the problems in Chicago has been over the years you’ve gotten political _____(??), boundaries of wards have been designed to protect incumbents and you have a degeneration of creative government.

SM: So tell me the story of your experience of the Democratic Convention in late August 1968.

KR: I’d been in Lincoln Park and I had smelled the tear gas and thought here is groups of people just in peaceful protest not bothering anybody except maybe killing of some of the grass that grew on the ground in Lincoln Park. And we knew that we had to do something about being on the street to try to combat the violence that was being perpetrated by the police who were operating totally outside the bounds. Michigan Avenue was a wash with demonstrators as well as police. And the police devised the tactic that they would do sweeps of the street. Pushing everybody off the street, going up to the river by the Tribune Tower and then turn around and go the opposite direction and take them down to Roosevelt Road. And it was counterproductive because all they were doing was provoking the demonstrators. People who were demonstrating for a peaceful resolution of issues that were facing the Democratic Convention. They were not doing anything violent at that point. And yet the police by their sweeps put up and down were provoking people. And when you provoke people so far you going to get a negative reaction. I was in front of the office building about a block from the Art Institute and there was a young woman who had been part of the demonstrators. And she was cowering and she was shaking and she was obviously having a traumatic anxiety attack because being caught up in all of this and not knowing what to do and so I—she was hovering at the corner of the entrance way. I—we were on the street with our clerical collars, so that we were clearly identifiable to the police of who we were and why we were there because we had told the police that we are there to ensure safety and avoid violence on the streets. I knelt down to ask the girl how she was doing and she was barely able to get a sentence out. And as I was talking to her a policemen came up to us and with his stanch raised he was about ready to club me and the girl. And for some reason I had the ability to you don’t want to do that and I sure don’t want you to do that. Why don’t you just move on? I was able to say that in a calm voice, nonthreatening. Let’s resolve this peacefully. And a sigh of relief
came over his face and he dropped his nightstick and went on his way. And I then helped
the girl get to a safe place where she could then get back into a safe environment. And it
taught me about the futility of the violence about how they rationed it up and this cop
wanted to club—clobber us both over the heads when we were doing nothing. We were
just hovering in the doors door opening. And I thought this is being repeated time after
time after time after time. And using tear gas, using excessive force was not solving
anything.

SM: So what other encounters did you have with women at the convention?

KR: Had some encounters in which the delegates were meeting and they wanted to know
what was happening on the street and we were able to interpret and meet with them an
explain why were here, what were doing, both the demonstrators as well as the clergy.

We saw this weekend in the instances in Baltimore where the clergy were able to say to
the people hold back. They were able to talk to delegates and say this is another view of
what’s going on in the street. There were women clergy who were with us and were
identified as clergy so they were standing with us and were apart of the protest and part
of the reaction to the protest. So as equals in that process we probably were concerned
that they not be in harms way. That men can handle the harm better than they could with
______(??) perspectives were slow to die and they haven’t all died. I still hold the door
open for people from time to time. But it was able to get with those who were on the floor
and could then make statements that countered the ranting and raving of Mayor Daly and
uh do it with facts they had just experienced and seen.

SM: So when did you feel united with the other protestors?

KR: I don’t think I ever felt un-united because I wouldn’t of been on the street four
nights in a row if I didn’t feel if I didn’t believe in their right to protest. I mean
that’s part of the Democratic process. That we believe that the right to dissent is a God
given right. It is part of—part of our constitution, it’s part of our voters______(??). And
so I took exception to some of the behavior of some of the demonstrators who were you
know tossing things at the cops which was provoking in face to face confrontation. With
both sides yelling at each other and being able to say, this is counterproductive, this is not
accomplishing anything. Why don’t you cool down? And why don’t you stand aside and
let peace have a chance and have some perspective on it.

SM: So what difference were you making by being at the convention?

KR: We reduced the number of personal injuries. We avoided death of both the police
and demonstrators. We got a different dialogue going, a different dynamic going, that it
isn’t what the Chief of Police has said or the mayor has said. We were able to get airtime
and interpret to the larger community both sides of the issue. And how nothing is being
accomplished by the simple demonstrations that are only enhancing and increasing the
violence and the disagreement and the destruction of community. It’s costly to carry on
demonstrations like that. It is costly in terms of police power. (Clears throat) And trying
to get airtime for both the police officer perspective in terms of what he or she was going
through as well as the demonstrator what they were going through. And to get some
understanding of the common ground that exists.

SM: So when did you experience the police showing restraint with you and other
protestors?

KR: Go back to my earlier example when the guy lowered his Billy club that was a
success. When we could stand in front of the building and people could carry on their
chanting and the police would just keep moving, they wouldn’t stop, they wouldn’t
pause. When you talk to a police officer and I’ve done some police training in my
experience in my life. Police personnel are human beings also. And they are—I want to
respect their dignity as a human being and but I want them to operate in the bounds of
law. As they expect others to operate within the bounds of law. They to should be within
the bounds of law.

SM: So when did you see the police step outside there means to deal with you and other
protestors?

KR: When they appr—had the push against the crowds. Pushing against them for no
obvious reason other then to just demonstrate their power to do that. When the tear gas
was thrown—they did not have rubber bullets at that point that I can remember. But when
the police as fraternity operating coherence with one another and being able to say—to be
able to bring a different perspective to the table. And say to them this is not productive,
this is not helpful and this should not be tolerated.

SM: So how was it participating on the PCUSA Boards of National Admissions in New
York?

KR: I had the fortunate job of having a portfolio with money. And I could fly in as a
consultant to churches around the country that if they acted in concert and we raised a
certain amount of money. We could match from a national standpoint. There was a
sensitizing and developmental process. We did a workshop with a group of women in
terms of nursing home investigations. Helping them understand what a good nursing
home looks like because they were doing inspections in Indiana and all they got was bad
smelling nursing homes. I said a good nursing home doesn’t smell. And we were able to
train them up at the program up at the Presbyterian home in Evanston to know what to
look for and how to look for it. We ran a mock prison environment for chaplains to help
them understand what it’s like to operate within the walls of a secure institution, prison or
a large jail. And how tensions grow between the inmates and the guards and how you
keep a perspective on that. And how you come to respect all sides and avoid violence in
doing that. So there are a number of examples like that. And then the community
organizing was taking shape in cities around the country. We were able to use the
organizing skills we refined in Chicago and learn in Chicago to get training in community
organizing in the other cities and fund that.

SM: So what was life like in America after the troops returned home?

KR: (Deep Breath) After the troops returned home. Have they ever returned home?

SM: After the Vietnam war.

KR: My son-in-law was a medic in the Vietnam War and um its taken him years to be
able to talk. And we’ve had some very good conversations. And I’ve respected what he
went through and respected his perspective on it because he went through hell. And I
don’t think we’ve done enough ventilating of what people went through in the
environment of war, in particularly Vietnam, because it was a terrible war. It was an
insidious confrontation. People were stretched to their limits and when stretched to their
limits they sometimes don’t live up to their own expectations of themself. And people
have horror stories. I think you need to tell those horror stories. I think from a therapeutic
standpoint you need to get those stories out. And we’ve not done enough of that. We’re
not doing enough of that today because we’ve got soldiers returning from battle. One,
coming from a battle that wasn’t necessary and, two, not able to get the support that they
need medically or psychologically or humanly as a person. And hopefully more of us are—more of the general population is aware of that. But when we ask people to go to war we ask them to pay a terrible price.

**SM:** So what were you able to accomplish as the Organizing Community Relations Director for Oak Park?

**KR:** I was called back to Oak Park—we had lived in Oak Park in the 60s and I came back in ’72. Oak Park was trying to become an intentional integrated community and not suffer the block by block black desegregation that happened all over the West side of Chicago. By organizing block clubs, by organizing neighborhood groups, people were informed about what was going on. So mythology and air and misinformation was kept to a minimum. People had a sense that they could control what was happening on their block. But I think what happened the most was when we did some testing of realtors. And said that they are going to be held to the code of conduct, the code of ethics to be operative in a nondiscriminatory fashion and people have access to housing they can afford. And by putting, getting, the license for all those seventeen realtors because of illegal practice on their part put the others on notice that this will not be tolerated.

**SM:** So what was it like working as the Vice President of Public Affairs at Harris Bank?

**KR:** I had worked in the church, I had worked in government and I wanted to work in the private sector. It is interesting that people are the same in all three sectors. And I was amazed at myself for landing the job at Harris Bank because I thought, are they gunna hire a do gooder, a social worker, a clergymen to do a job at a bank. But I realized at the bank they had some of the same problems of interpersonal relationships. They had some of the same problems of speaking the truth and finding the truth and acting on it. And I was able as a Community Relations Vice President for the bank, facilitating neighborhood tours so that they became more familiar with the neighborhoods. Investing our money in neighborhood groups who were doing organizing a little bit outside the Art Institute and North Western University motif by managing the contributions dollars that brings in money to it. I think one of the strong experiences I had was as clergymen I had people coming to my office and start talking about I have a friend that is— and it would often turn out that the person who was talking about their friend, was talking about themself. And I would turn around and say well what do you think you want to do about this. And we were able to set up an employee assistance program, which the person could get psychological, social work, support, counseling support to deal with the issue that they were dealing with. It was the first EAP, Employee Assistance Program, that got started in major downtown corporation. And it’s now spread so that EAP is an expected part of Human Resources, helping people cope with their problems.

**SM:** So what impact were you able to make in Colombia with CSLA Congregations in Solidarity?

**KR:** When I went as part of a peace delegation to Colombia. We were having a lot of guerilla activity going on in Colombia. And you had super powers (paper flips) who were raping the land. They were taking away farmland owned by indigenous farmers and turning it into um palm tree orchards because the price of palm oil was productive. They could come in—and the government was allowing them to come in and destroy the land...
by taking it over and uprooting local farmers. Their basic rights even under the
Constitution of Colombia was being violated by those actions. We were able to visit with
public officials, the um representatives of government of Colombia and say we are
watching what we believe are illegal actions and we want you to change your behavior.
And we can—it was like chapter and verse of this farmer, this farmer, this farmer who
had either been disappeared, being taken, stolen by, kidnapped by the guerillas or land
taken away and not been able to get a hearing in the government. We were able to
facilitate people getting hearing. We were able to get people who had applied for Visas to
come to the United States and that the Visas were being denied or not considered or it
was taking a nauseating amount of time to get their hu—basic rights honored. And we
had the kind of give and take people we were supporting who were fighting, struggling,
to hold on to their lives. And by intervening and visiting the white people from America
had a clout that we didn’t realize. It was clear that when we visited with the person about
hi—he was the Commisioner on Refugee Act Action from the United Nations. And I must
say that he was the most honest person that we met with. And reflected the frustration
that the United Nations was having in trying to control the government or influence the
government in Colombia to do what they had committed to do.

SM: So how did the events of 1968 change you?
KR: I think it’s helped me reaffirm the depravity of man. And the lengths that people
will go to have superiority over the other. Then the other being someone who is different
from me, who is different race, different ethnicity, different economic class and it is
caused me to constantly applying the lens of how am I—how am I influenced by that in
my own behavior, how do I void behavior that is nondiscriminatory and non-respectful
and destructive of the values and the rights of others? And it just permeates my being, so
that um always looking for what’s the justice side of an issue. It has raised my paranoia
that I am constantly sometimes thinking the worst of people because I have seen
depravity. I’ve see how people are corruptible and are corrupting others. And how do I
void myself from getting into that context? And how do I ensure that others are helped to
see the errors and the sins of their way rather than seeing the goodness, truth and beauty
in people?

SM: So what are you most proud of as an activist?
KR: During the King era I was on a T.V. program and I was talking about the actions
that I have taken. And I made the comment that I have to constantly confront the racism
in myself, in my own life. And constantly confront the propensity that it is to be the
superior person. It was a taped program that the following Sunday was going to be aired
and I’m sitting, watching it with my three girls. And they said well how come you are
saying that you’re a racist. And so I repeated my same _____(??) about how I’ve been
privileged, I have had opportunities that others have not had and I have taken advantage
of that. And they have all gone on to become very solid, humane people enjoying the
other, enjoying an integrated community and celebrated that. So being able to raise three
kids who carry on the vision has probably been one of the deepest satisfactions I have
had. And to be able to be sitting here today talking with you, the fact (clears throat) that
were still keeping on, and having the power—I’ve got a circle of friends, circle of
acquaintances that have shared experiences. And we can constantly come together and
reinforce and analyze how we’re doing and what we’re doing and hold one another
accountable. And be comfortable in saying that really is not the right thing to be doing
Interview with Reverend H Kris Ronnow

and still be friends. And then friendship goes on and builds on both the positives as well as the negatives.

SM: So what was the most regrettable consequence of the 1986 Democratic Convention?

KR: (Deep breath) I think it marked the Democratic party with some negative perspective on the parts of others who have not trusted them or who have said I don’t want to go there. I think there is a propensity in our society to want to be at the top of the hill, to be the affluent, to be successful. And let others serve our needs rather than us serving their needs. And I think its soured a lot of people on the Democratic power. And I think it also soured people who don’t believe in contact. Who don’t believe in confrontation. And yet conflict and confrontation can be a positive. And we can be survive it and be better because we’ve gone through that conflict. But people don’t (clears throat) have a strong taste in their being. To many people are to willing to get by and not address grievances and things that are wrong. And I think that’s part of what I have seen as basic to my ministry is helping people see that you can face conflict and controversy in love and get a result.

SM: So what was the most positive consequence of the 1968 Democratic Convention?

KR: Mayor Daly was outted as the tyrannical person that he was. And that other corruptible powers were enforced that needed to be changed and those—and they did get changed.

SM: So what parallels do you see between 1968 and now?

KR: We haven’t learned much. I—Watching the news this week. Seeing the confrontations in Boston—in Baltimore and (clears throat) go back to Rodney King, go back to any number of instances where we continue to have unprofessional behavior by a small portion of the police whose power it is to enforce the law, to maintain the law, and the need to constantly challenge that. I think the vast majority of police officers, as well as the vast majority of people, are positive, productive thinkers and yet they get hidden behind the minority who act illegally and dishonestly. And the need to keep dealing with that, the frustration of—I can find it hard to imagine, and I’ve tried, to understand the frustration of a black male young man is dealing with. With the constant harassment stopping. As I said earlier, I’ve never been stopped by the police, I’ve never been searched by the police. Is that because I’m white or that I’ve been the paragon of virtue? Well there have been times when I probably should’ve been stopped and I should’ve been frisked, but that didn’t happen because I was white. And that’s not right. And we keep seeing it, we keep repeating it, the streets are still boiling, the kids are still bad paid, are still suffering brain disorders because of that. And it’s wrong. And we can do better because we have the resources to do better. But there are too many—a significant minority—that says I want mine and I want mine now and the rest be damned.

SM: So what changes do people need to make to find peace with one another?

KR: They have to open themselves up to a relationship with people different then themselves (clears throat) and in doing that not allow the fear mongers to rule the day. I think we get intimidated, ratchet up the society, and make the other into something that’s bad, negative. When the other can be restorative and transforming. And we don’t experience that unless we open ourselves up to that.

SM: So where in the past would you have liked to make change?

KR: Again.

SM: Where in the past would you have liked to create change?
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KR: (Pause) I think that (clears throat) in my work in Oak Park at the Community Organizing that I did. I would have liked to see more people participate in that and I think that when you are organizing the community once you get it organized you have to start all over again. Because when the have nots become the haves they seem to perpetuate and protect what they have. So we have to constantly keep organizing. Saul Alinski did some of his basic organizing in the backyards where the stockyard workers who faced despicable conditions in the pens in the stockyards. And he organized them and then it became the organized became the affluent and then they had forgot those that they had left behind. I think the labor movement is guilty of doing that very same thing in which they have people organize and then they get to be leadership position and then they seek to protect what they have and forget the troops. I think the need to constantly have that in motion. That’s unsettling to a lot of people because they think they want peace and tranquility and there is no future. There’s a place for tranquility and I get it when I’m sailing. And I’m grateful for that peace of mind, but it is only if it equips me, if it charges me up to deal with the down—(??)—the disenfranchised.

SM: So what’s it like connecting with people on a spiritual level?


(Sarah Laughs)

KR: I think that we don’t nurture our spiritual side enough. I’ve been working up a meditation to use next week in our counsel meeting. And I’m using the analogy of the sun rising. I’m compulsive about watching the sunrise because the sun rising is a new day, is a new beginning, is new possibilities, is a new future and we need to constantly reach for that because there is a whole lot of junk that we deal with everyday. And we all deal with a constant tide of disenchantment or destructive behavior one to one, in our personal relationships, in our corporate relationships. And we need to constantly see to improve that. And if we get in touch with our spirit and it’s the spirit that flows through all of us. To be positive, to be affirming and to witness a new day. I’m the eternal optimist. The cup is half empty. The cup is not half empty. The cup is half full.

SM: So what are some life lessons that you have taken away from your experiences?

KR: A delight indifference. That there is richness in finding out what somebody else’s journey has been and what somebody else’s journey is. It helps me put mine in perspective. And I am not the king of the hill. I don’t control the top of the mountain. We all function better. When we function as community we can in fact enhance one another and have a deeper sense of satisfaction, a deeper sense of love, a deepening sense of respect. And we can live together peacefully. But we got to work at it.

SM: So finally can you please state why you wanted to do this interview.

KR: Because you asked. When I was recruited to come—One of the things I have not done a good job of is journaling. And I’ve got lots of stories, lots of experiences that aren’t written down any place. And when I do sit down and write it is cathartic and it’s helpful. And it helps me reflect on both my arrogance and impotence in terms of dealing with stuff and I would only do more writing I could get that out and so this interview process and thinking about ’68 convention I had visited only episodically in the past. This project has helped me coalesce, redefine and define some of what I did and why it was important to me.

SM: Any final words? Any final stories you would like to share?
KR: I’m grateful that school is doing this. I’m grateful that you called. I’m grateful to get acquainted with you and to know that there is a new generation coming along who are interested in some of the transpiring values that enable a community to take place. And so that gives me hope. When I was on the board of Macalaster College for six years, I was reacquainted with the new student body that was coming up. They seem crazy. They seem different. They seem irrelevant or irreverent. They seem—Coming down the El this morning there are five people texting and I don’t text. As you know I seldom take answers from my cell phone. And it’s a new world, but I need to see that new world and the potential of that and see it positively. And so my grandson is trying to teach me how to text and he is very patient in helping me learn. And I need to do that because that’s the future. And I want to be apart of the future as well as celebrate the past.

SM: Got it. Well all that’s left is for me to thank you. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview.

KR: Happy to do it I’m glad we got together. I’ll wait to see a tape of it.

SM: (Laughs) Alright.