



## Roger J. Rietberg

May 19, 2020

Roger J. Rietberg was united with his loved ones on Tuesday, May 19—the postlude to 97 years of service on earth and prelude to eternity. Born in 1922 to Jay and Katherine Rietberg of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Roger was the oldest of four children (Eleonor and Verna, who predeceased him, and Warren, who lives in Grandville). He graduated from Lee High School in Wyoming and enrolled at Hope College in 1940. Returning home to Eighth Reformed Church to play the organ for the Sunday evening service in 1942, he saw the service stars hung in the sanctuary and felt a strong call to enlist. He joined the U.S. Army Air Force in November of his junior year in college and, following basic training in Florida, served in Italy in the 4th Troop Carrier Squadron 62nd Group as a radio operator. Following the war, he returned to Hope to complete his B.A. with a major in music in 1947.

In 1949 he earned his M.S.M. degree from Union Theological Seminary School of Sacred Music. While earning his degree, he studied with Vernon De Tar and played the organ at the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue. He continued his studies throughout his music career at the Juilliard School, Syracuse University, Harvard University, and numerous summer choral institutes in the U.S. and England. He served as the minister of music at First Methodist Church in Red Bank, New Jersey, from 1948 to 1950 and as adjunct professor and director of the Men's Choir at Western Theological Seminary shortly after. He was appointed minister of music at Third Reformed

Church in Holland in 1950, the beginning of a 45-year ministry and lifelong friendships with that congregation. He met his wife, Evelyn Huizenga, when he strategically invited her to sing for a Sunday service. Upon meeting her and hearing her voice, he ""knew right away that she was the one."" They were married at Third in 1955 and had four children – Jon, Tommy, Robbi, and Amy. Tommy was in third grade at Southside Christian School when he died following surgery for a brain tumor in 1968. Their 60-year marriage was founded on their deep love for each other and their shared passion for music.

Roger joined the Hope College music faculty in 1954. From 1964 to 1968, he served as Director of Admissions at Hope, recruiting students from the East Coast and promoting the college he loved. In 1968 he was appointed Associate Professor of Music (becoming Full Professor in 1977). Roger served for many years as the director of the Hope Chancel Choir (now College Chorus) and as director of the Men's Choir. In 1973 he took a sabbatical leave to study organ with Bernard Bartelink in the Netherlands, bringing his wife and family on one of the most memorable adventures of their family life. Roger also taught music theory, choral conducting, church music, music appreciation, and organ lessons and served as college organist and chair of the Christmas Vespers program.

Upon Robert Cavanaugh's retirement in 1974, he directed the Chapel Choir for 15 years, which became one of his life's greatest joys. He led the choir on tours throughout the U.S. and Canada, two tours to Europe and one to the Soviet Union, along with performances at area churches and campus convocations and services. His greatest legacy, however, was the relationships he formed as ""Coach"" (a term of endearment that stayed with him throughout his life). He earned that name by building a strong, unified team of diverse talents and taking special interest in their individual lives. His humor, high expectations, commitment to student voice, and appreciation for a job well done earned him deep respect. He had an amazing capacity for

remembering all of the names and details of his choir members' lives and for keeping in touch long after they left campus.

He was co-director of the ""Sounds of Friendship"" Choir from Western Michigan on their tour of The Netherlands in 1982 in observance of the Bicentennial of Dutch-American relations.

He was a longtime member of the Holland Rotary Club, the Century Club, and several musical organizations, including the College Choral Directors Association, the American Guild of Organists, and the Hymn Society of America. His influence on music in the Reformed Church included serving on the Worship Commission of the RCA and on the Hymnbook Committee with Erik Routley, which curated the hymnal *Rejoice in the Lord*. He retired from Hope College in 1990, following 36 years of teaching, and from Third Church in 1995. ""There are lots of things I wish I could have fit in,"" he said upon retiring from both, but to all who had the privilege of working with him, it is hard to imagine a richer life or career.

In his years of retirement, Roger was honored to play the organ for chapel services at Western Theological Seminary and for countless weddings and funerals of former Hope students and church friends. He devoted most of his energy, however, to being a husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather to his children, grandchildren (Becky Dykema and Katie Rietberg; Ryley, Sarah Kate, and Pieter Hartt; Maddie and Taylor Van Allsburg), and great grandchildren (Bella and Shane Dykema and Rhys Hartt). Following a fall and hip surgery in 2011, his quick step was slowed a bit, but he still made it religiously to JP's for coffee, ""kletzing"" with old and new friends. After Evelyn's passing, he resided at Appledorn North, where he formed deep ties with his caregivers and enjoyed reconnecting with many past colleagues. He was known for his twinkling eyes and warm greetings (as well as his love of Junior Mints).

Roger was buried with military honors on May 21 at Pilgrim Home Cemetery, following a small family ceremony. (To view the graveside service, please visit [www.langelandsterenberg.com](http://www.langelandsterenberg.com) and select the multimedia tab on Roger's page). His memorial celebration will be postponed until a later time (after virus restrictions are lifted). Memorial gifts may be made to The Roger and Evelyn Rietberg Music Scholarship Fund at Hope College and St. Baldrick's Foundation for childhood cancer research (<https://www.stbaldricks.org/memorial/220>).

The family was served by Langeland-Sterenbergh Funeral Home. To leave and condolence and more information, please visit [www.langelandsterenberg.com](http://www.langelandsterenberg.com).

# Tribute Wall

MR

“ My dad-in-law was a cousin of Roger & his siblings. My husband Wayne (who is deceased) & I knew all of them but especially Verna. Peg, if you see this, my sympathy in the passing of your uncle. Wayne & I went to Evelyn's & Verna's memorial services, and after he died in 2019, I went alone to Warren's wife Lois' service. My sympathy to Warren and to Roger's family. What a rich, full life he lived! I will not be able to attend Roger's memorial svc as I am dealing with Stage 4 cancer of the bone and liver, which is why I am writing this note. Blessings to all.

Marilyn Rietberg - May 21, 2025 at 05:53 PM

MK

“ Sad to read about his passing,..But good memories though. I met mr Roger Rietberg and wife Evelyn coincidentally in 1973 in Kruiningen, The Netherlands. Me being 15 years old and able to arrange them to get into the village church and the organ, he was so happy to be able to play there. unforgettable. Have had a extended correspondance over the years, het sent me a blue HOPE COLLEGE shirt. I was surprised it made my day, nobody had such a shirt overhere. I'd worn the shirt for years. On a sunny day in 1998 they again visited Kruiningen accompanied by some dutch relatives and they stepped by at my house. He played the organ in my living room, I showed him the t-shirt that was still in my attack, somewhat worn but HOPE COLLEGE still clearly visible,..Rest in Peace mr Rietberg, I feel privilged having met you. Sjaak van Loo, Kruiningen The Netherlands,



Mary Soeter Keppeler - May 20, 2025 at 12:09 PM

MK

“ I'm saddened to learn of Mr. Rietberg's passing. Of all my college profs, he made the greatest impression on me (3 years of Chapel Choir will do that.) As noted in the obit. he did, indeed, have a twinkle in his eye! His energy and love of music were translated into a passion for music that infected us all. I will never forget the way he conducted O Come, O Come Emmanuel at Vespers. It was a privilege to know him and an honor to have him at Hope (1978-1982).

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**Mary Soeter Keppeler** - May 20, 2025 at 12:08 PM

JH

“ I send sympathies to your family. I remember meeting Roger in different places -- all related to church or music. My husband I would occasionally see him at Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, and I know that my father-in-law and mother-in-law grew close to Roger and Evelyn while Dad was working on the Pels organ in the balcony at Dimnent Chapel. Roger left a legacy in all of the students and other musical connections he made.

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**Jan Heerspink** - May 20, 2025 at 12:08 PM

BG

“ I send you all my deepest sympathies on the passing of Dr. Roger Rietberg. He was such a great teacher and friend. I am deeply indebted to him for teaching me so much about music, and choral conducting. I have always felt honored that he chose me to conduct the Chancel Choir on numerous occasions during my junior and senior years at Hope College. Because of my experiences with him, I am assured that he has left a lasting legacy for hundreds, maybe thousands of others. May he rest in peace and rise with Christ in glory.

*The Rev. Bruce Gillies, Class of '63*

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**Bruce N Gillies** - May 20, 2025 at 12:08 PM

LZ

“ My condolences to the Rietberg family. Want to echo all my chapel choir friends' sentiments - this was my "sorority/fraternity" for sure. Lots of fun memories but also a very high level of excellence and expectation from "Coach!" We had serious music majors and fun-loving athletes in our group and everyone contributed and participated - a credit, I think, to Roger's ability to weave together a time for fun and a time for hard work. It was fun to reconnect with him a little bit in the past few years at Hope volleyball matches (Go Katie!). He will be missed!

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**Lannette Zylman-TenHave** - May 20, 2025 at 12:07 PM

PR

“ If I had to pick the 5 best things about my time at Hope, singing for Coach would be one of them. He was a great musician, professor and gentleman. His music at Third Reformed brightened the morning nearly 33 years ago as my bride walked down the aisle, and then years later supported me as we carried out my fathers casket. He was indeed a good man and we are all a little better for having known him. I wish his family an extra measure of Christs peace.

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**Paul Ritsema** - May 20, 2025 at 12:07 PM

TR

“ Although I never sang for Roger (which was probably a good thing), I had such a deep respect for him and he always took a keen interest in my life. He was such a caring and thoughtful man and will be truly missed. Prayers to his entire family and my deepest condolences.

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**Tim Ritsema** - May 20, 2025 at 12:07 PM

SB

“ *What a beautiful tribute to a wonderful man and musician. Unfortunately, I didn't perform with him, or know him well, but always admired him. Cherish the memories.*

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**Sandy Buller** - May 20, 2025 at 12:07 PM

RV

“ *Our deepest sympathies to the Rietberg family. My wife Cheryl ('76) and I both studied organ with Roger at Hope in the mid 1970's. In fact, Roger introduced us as our lessons were back to back. For that I will always be grateful. Roger taught me many things, but one thing I learned from him wasn't in any lesson. When I would hear him play at Third Reformed I would always get goosebumps hearing his transition from the Offertory Anthem to the Doxology, and I wanted to be able to do the same for others. Roger was always kind, supportive, and generous. When he and Evelyn moved out of their house, they had me over to choose any organ music I would like to have from his collection. I came away with a large box full, and think of him often when playing his music. Roger was not just a teacher, but also a friend. I will miss him.*

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**Richard VanOss** - May 20, 2025 at 12:06 PM

KO

“ *Coach included me in a choir I was probably not qualified to sing in, allowing me to visit the USSR and make incredible friendships. His passion for music and seeing more in people were some of the things that set him apart. Condolences to his family. ❤️*

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**Ken Olivier** - May 20, 2025 at 12:06 PM

RV

“ Mary and I express our deep condolences to the Rietberg family. We held Roger in high esteem as a musician, a college professor, and a friend. Roger and I especially enjoyed talking about church music and the liturgy, especially for Holy Communion, while he was organist at Western Seminary and I was on the faculty there. He also liked to engage me in conversations about Union Seminary (NY), where he took his STM degree and I did my PhD. We went there in different generations, but knew a few people in common, so we "compared notes." I will miss him, and I look forward to the time when we can gather in Third Church to give him a proper memorial service, full of glorious music. Even now we can have the sure hope that Roger has joined in the praises of God offered by the grand company of the saints and angels.

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**Robert Van Voorst** - May 20, 2025 at 12:06 PM

BM

“ Roger was a kind, gentle man.....always complimentary to fellow musicians. He was insistent that I accompany Evelyn(a relative to my husband) when she sang at First Church.  
Blessings to your family!

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**Beverly Mulder** - May 20, 2025 at 12:06 PM

JA

“ Thanks COACH for being a blessing to me and so many others throughout the decades. Many wonderful and blessed memories over from Hope College to Western Theological Seminary. Below - from the Chapel Choir tour in California during a rehearsal break at the Crystal Cathedral.



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**Jeff Allen** - May 20, 2025 at 12:06 PM

AA

“ Our sympathy to all of Roger's family. Will always remember his connection to 8th Reformed Church in GR.He was such a good friend to my former husband, Dr. John H. Piet, and played the organ at Hope Church for his funeral. We will miss his organ concerts.

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**Ann Piet Anderson** - May 20, 2025 at 12:05 PM

JB

“ A true gentleman and a scholar! He was admired, respected, and loved by many Hope Students as a teacher and a friend. I was fortunate to sing under his direction in the Men's Choir and the Chapel Choir and to study organ with him as well. Loved his music at 8:am Chapel Services from 1956 to 1960A GREAT Man.,

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**John (Greg) Bryson** - May 20, 2025 at 12:05 PM

DG

“ Amy and family- Our sincere sympathy to you on the home going of your dad. May God give you peace in the upcoming days, weeks and months as you remember your dad and grandpa with loving memories. Your dad had a wonderful and full life!

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**Dave and Tammy Grassmid** - May 20, 2025 at 12:04 PM

GD

“ I can to Hope College in 1962 knowing only one person, Roger Rietberg. I met him as a high school student exploring colleges at the Knickerbocker Hotel in NYC in 1961 when he was actively recruiting students from the greater metropolitan area. His ability to remember you, greet you with a smile over the years was a gift he gave to all who knew him!  
To Jon and the rest of the extended Rietberg families blessings as you grieve and celebrate his life in these confined times

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**Graham Duryee** - May 20, 2025 at 12:04 PM

SE

“ Hi Robbi, So Sorry go read about your Dad. Reading the obit and it's sure apparent he had a full and great life. I remember going to your House in school and he always took time out to talk to us. And also I called him years ago to get you address to send you a Birthday card. He still remembered me and we had a nice talk. I'm sure he will be missed by lots! Thinking of you during these times. Also, Happy Birthday coming up next Month!!

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**Steve Edewaard** - May 20, 2025 at 12:04 PM

SA

“ When I worked at Hope College he was the kindest Professor to new employees. I never forgot that and always enjoyed his directing of the Christmas Vespers and Hope College choirs under his direction. As an organist he was truly gifted and I enjoyed any time he played in church or at Hope. He will be missed.

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**Sally Anderson** - May 20, 2025 at 12:04 PM

EB

“ We have such wonderful memories of Coach as our choir director at Hope. He loved his visit to Evan's family farm in NW Iowa. He will be greatly missed! We extend our deepest sympathy to all of Coach's family. May you feel the love and comfort from our Lord and from the community that loved him. Evan and Nancy Boote

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**Evan and Nancy Boote** - May 20, 2025 at 12:04 PM

HW

“ Our sympathy to you, VanAllsburgs, on the loss of your very talented Dad/Grandpa. I have so many fond memories of your Dad/Grandpa as my chapel choir director at Hope. He was a quiet, gentle soul who was so kind to all of us. Lot of love and hugs to you as you grieve his loss. Love, The Wolterinks

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**Heather Wolterink** - May 20, 2025 at 12:03 PM