

Jim Pitts

Interviewee: Jim Pitts

Interviewer: Courtney L. Tollison, Ph.D.

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Transcript

Dr. Tollison: In my background check on you I discovered a few things. You were a student here. You graduated in 1960. I just want to make sure all this correct. You came back as assistant chaplain under L.D. Johnson in '67.

Mr. Pitts: That's correct.

Dr. Tollison: And then in '82 or '84 you became...

Mr. Pitts: '81.

Dr. Tollison: '81, I'm sorry, in '81 you became chaplain and retired last year, 2003. Is that correct?

Mr. Pitts: That's correct.

Dr. Tollison: I think, just some thoughts, just from my information that I'd like to go over. One, what it was like to be a student here from 1956 to '60. Some of your experiences after leaving Furman. What brought you back. I understand that there was a lot of student unrest in the late '60s and early '70s, things like the speakers policy, Vietnam, that kind of stuff. Obviously we want to talk quite a bit about Joe Vaughn as well. And then, of course, throughout this whole thing, I'd like to keep in mind, changing, Furman's changing religious identity, Furman's, our relationship with the South Carolina Baptist Convention and how this has changed and how it's evolving. If there were any watershed events in the 1980s, I mean, sort of last straws dropped in 1980 that led up to the 1990-1992 split. And where do you think, and we're just gonna overview, we'll talk through all of this. And what do you think Furman's religious identity is now, where has it been in the last twelve years, where is it going, things like this. And anything extra you have to add as well. Any concerns you have about the future of Furman. And sort of, are we delineating too much from where we've been, from our heritage and that kind of stuff. Let's start out with your days as a student, if you don't mind, between '56 and '60.

Mr. Pitts: We can start a year earlier. I came to Furman in 1955.

Dr. Tollison: Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

Mr. Pitts: No, and that says something about my career in terms of my student days. I am

a native of Washington, D.C. I was born and raised in Washington. My folks were from South Carolina, my father from the Greenville area, Fork Shoals, and my mother was from the Seneca, a little town called Townville. And so I was born and raised in Washington. My ties to Greenville were sort of reinforced when I was probably in the first and second grade. My mother was an alcoholic and my family went through a crisis and separation which eventually lead to a divorce. And my father brought me and my brother to live with his mother here in Greenville. And so this was, probably I was about seven years of age, so this was during World War II and we lived on Raleigh Street which is parallel to North Main and as a matter of fact one of my childhood memories is meeting Dr. Ramsay [David M. Ramsay]. Dr. Ramsay was the president of the Greenville Woman's College. And he would ride his horse, a chestnut – how's that for trivia being remembered? – and I would see Dr. Ramsay often coming through my grandmother's backyard on his horse. And for a youngster raised in Washington, D.C., I usually only see people on horses that were on statues. And so meeting Dr. Ramsay was like, he was very erect in the saddle, was like seeing a civil war general for me. (laughs) Little did I know that my early memories of Furman were being fashioned there in my grandmother's backyard. After my parents divorced we moved back with my father to Washington and my father eventually remarried and I finished high school in 1955. Now, why Furman? And this, of course, I'm always amazed that all these expert marketing and management people are so sure how teenagers make decisions about college. I had been pretty much raised in the church but my stepmother's religious affiliation was Lutheran and we lived very close to a Lutheran church so I was pretty much active in my formative years in the Lutheran church. Through an experience as a president of the Luther League I got involved in hosting one of these Billy Graham films and it was a film about the London crusade that Billy Graham had in the early 1950s. And this was shown in the Lutheran church on a Sunday evening and a number of people in the church were very much offended because not only the film was shown but the person who, at the conclusion of the film, offered an invitation to save and discipleship and that he would presume that anyone in the church was not a believer. And so this was quite a controversy and put me to really thinking and wondering, you know, is this valid and all like that and this sort of adolescent faith crisis. And I remembered the religious nurture and hospitality and really faithful mission that occurred by grandmother Pitts, who was a Baptist. So I began this track of an adolescent and ended up at the Chevy Chase Baptist Church. Now see, I was never raised in what we would know as Baptist Fundamentalism. The pastor of the church, who had been a friend of our family during my family's marital crisis, Dr. Clark, was a student of Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch was the father of the Social Gospel and so a very significant person. And really Rauschenbusch and Rauschenbusch's influence serves as the underpinnings for the civil rights movement. And so I was raised in that kind of Baptist, or I joined that sort of Baptist congregation, became active in the congregation and I decided "Well let's do the Billy Graham film thing again." Which we did and it was very well and warmly received. And this was such a time of, I guess, personal affirmation that I felt, well, you know, there's something about this faith and felt a sense of call to ministry. Well as an adolescent where is the nearest Baptist College? Well

unknown to me the University of Richmond in Wake Forest, my thoughts were, well Furman and Greenville. And so as a freshman in 1955, another one of my family members, a cousin, was getting out of the Air Force and so I rode with him from Washington to Greenville to enter Furman on September the fifteenth of 1955. Now why I remember that date, this is in pre-computer days, and we had to do all this manual filling out of long forms, cards that would then be torn apart, and I wrote September the fifteenth so many times I remembered that was the time that I registered at Furman. They're very interesting formation things there. I'm trying to think. Part of my time in my freshman and sophomore years were living on campus, on what was then the Old Campus, and living in the dorm there, the residence hall.

Dr. Tollison: Which dorm?

Mr. Pitts: I'm trying to think. It's there at the corner where the Block F was right across from the library and I think it's Geer Hall. I think Geer Hall was the name of it and I can tell you lots of stories about Geer Hall. The time that we dammed up one of the shower rooms and made it into a swimming pool and nothing happened, I mean the structure held, where, you know, in today's construction it would go down. Or the time that a friend of mine was gone for the weekend and we moved his entire room into the shower, it was just set up like his room but don't turn on the water. So these sorts of things. And then my father's family and my mother's family were here in the Greenville area and I lived with an uncle for about a year also during the freshman and sophomore kind of years. I think what probably is interesting to note is that I always have had sort of a very strong work ethic and kind of entrepreneurial activity and it was my commitment to finance my college education period. I'm sure that my father could have but it was, I guess, a sort of kind of adolescence independence, "I can do it myself." As my grandchildren tell me "No papa, let me do it." And so, early on, having a background in Washington in broadcasting, I got involved in broadcasting within Greenville and working with a couple stations here and one over in Greer.

Dr. Tollison: Was this in high school in Washington, D.C.?

Mr. Pitts: In high school, yeah. I guess I need to back up. My father was Milton Pitts. Dad was a barber, hair stylist as they say now, and was extremely successful and popular. From among other things, he created the "flattop" haircut if you can remember that in terms of old and olden days. You've seen pictures or cartoons about it. I never had a flattop but a young man who was a classmate of mine, who later on went on to be a high school, then later, Redskins football star, had the first flattop and it caught on. So, my dad's shop, after school, it was like people were in line to see a first-run movie to get a flattop. Well Dad also was very much involved in doing a lot of politicians and show business peoples' hair, so his shop had always been like a Who's Who of folks in entertainment. And through a couple of these people I got to be acquainted with some folks in radio. Milt Grant, Bill Mayhew, who were Washington personalities at that time, and got an invitation from them. I was one of the kids hanging around the radio

station and doing various things and trying to be generally useful. Dad, by the way, after I was at Furman, working at Furman, Dad later also became the barber to the presidents. Growing up in Washington was growing up in a small southern town and people that folks were kind of in awe about we just kind of knew as part of the community. And some folks come and some folks go and then there's a kind of a constant there. But Dad was one of those constants in the Washington scene and was often, well later in his life, did a lot of appearances on Carson and Letterman and all those kinds of things, you know. And he died, matter of fact, Christmas almost ten years ago now. But he had quite a career. So I had that sort of confidence building experience through my relationships in growing up with those people. Came to Greenville, was a student at Furman and working, generally, full time. I had this thing about the ministry and so I got involved also with a person – that, turned out now, is a part of my extended family who is my wife's cousin – assisting this young man in his church on the weekends. So doing all these kinds of activities and was very, very busy. I could have various ways of rationalizing this but I wasn't Furman's best student, you know. (laughs) But I also wasn't a person hanging around the financial aid office. Matter of fact, in my five years at Furman I received \$75 in financial aid and that was such a hassle to get that I thought, you know, "Forget it!" I could make \$75 quicker than going through that big process. But again, keeping in mind, Furman has a very different price structure in terms of the economy than what we have now. One time it was time for tuition and I didn't quite have enough to pay my tuition so I borrowed the remainder from my roommate. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: That's a good roommate.

Mr. Pitts: But it was very much a different world.

Dr. Tollison: That wouldn't happen today.

Mr. Pitts: No, although I don't know, some roommates probably could figure lots of ways to cover that. I guess one of the significant things that happened to me during those years is I met a young woman who had just finished the Greenville General School of Nursing, Greenville General Hospital School of Nursing, named Nancy Stewart from Six Mile. And so Nancy and I got married in 1958, so I was a married Furman student besides being a single student. And during the fall of '58, if you will remember – we got married in July – Furman then moved to quote "New Campus." So I was a part of that transition group from the old campus in downtown to the new campus. And also took classes at the Greenville Woman's College. The Greenville Woman's College was there on College Street and just about two blocks from WESC radio. And so I would – we lived in the Calhoun Towers – and I would go to Furman Woman's College and go to work and could do it all within about two blocks of walking. I guess that was the best financial aid package I ever got was my marriage. (laughs) And I tease my wife that she continued to support me in the manner I've grown accustomed.

Dr. Tollison: When you came to Furman what was the relationship between Furman and the Greenville Woman's College?

Mr. Pitts: It was one and the same. See this was Furman University and the coordination of the two schools began probably back in the late, or in the middle 1930s. And so it was a seamless type thing. And even that we have – there's an old film I found in the basement of the administration building, oh, years ago, a silent movie – we made a documentary back on the 150th anniversary and used some of that film. But it shows the busses that would run from the men's campus to the women's campus. And also we had women living on the men's campus then too, and matter of fact, one of my life-long colleagues and friends is Betty Alverson. And Betty was also living on the old men's campus in the woman's dorm, I think it was called Montague or something like that.

Dr. Tollison: Montague, yes. I interviewed Ted Ellett yesterday. She told me all about it.

Mr. Pitts: Did you? Oh, Ted is a dear.

Dr. Tollison: She told me all about Montague.

Mr. Pitts: Well, Betty Alverson lived in Montague. Matter of fact, kind of jumping ahead, in 1967, when I came to work with L.D. [L.D. Johnson] as his associate, we had women living in Manly dormitory and so we called them the "Manly Women." And the question is what do you do about urinals that are in a men's dormitory when women are using the restroom? They kept potted plants in the urinals! (laughs) So we had the proximity living with women living on the south side of the campus. And, by the way, proximity living works well. Primarily it keeps the guys from really acting out 'cause you're not gonna really act out if you have women around watching you. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: So when you came to the new campus, where did you and your wife live then?

Mr. Pitts: Okay, I need to probably finish. We finished Furman in 1960. I went off to seminary at Southeastern in Wake Forest, North Carolina. And really in seminary I really began to grow up and take things much more seriously academically. There was another crisis in my personal life during that time. I mentioned my mother, she had sort of, kind of disappeared for a while and we reconnected. And during my seminary days my mother was murdered in New York City and so we came back. Matter of fact, my family roots on my mother's side are really part of the new campus including the Reedy River Baptist Church area. I had family that purchased land here which is part of the northern edge of the campus on August the 28th of 1837. And how I can remember that, 'cause that was a hundred years before I was born, and I was at a family meeting and they were reading this thing and they bought this property. So my mother's family had roots in this area too so her funeral was there at the Reedy River Church and she's buried there in the Reedy River Church Cemetery. Finishing Southeastern I had several options: one of the options, I had an interest... By the

way, at Furman I majored in Psychology, I didn't major in Religion. And again, why do people choose majors? I have a hunch that most people choose a major because it has some sort of personal fulfillment or need and I was really messed up. I was trying to figure me out and so this was probably the cheapest way to get therapy is to major in psychology. And the more I read about abnormal psychology the more I... there I am on those pages. I guess the thing that differs most of us from people that are institutionalized in psychiatric units – I was institutionalized in a college – is that you just simply turn up the volume. (laughs) And so I was a psychology major and got very much interested in the whole area of psychology and pastoral care. I did some work at the North Carolina Baptist Hospital during that time in a program called Clinical Pastoral Education. Finishing seminary, I had an opportunity to go into institutional work with some CPE programs like at the Georgia Baptist Hospital.

Dr. Tollison: CPE?

Mr. Pitts: C-P-E. Clinical Pastoral Education. I hate to say this. Furman celebrates engaged learning? Engaged learning has been going on for a long time.

Dr. Tollison: Just have a new word for it.

Mr. Pitts: It's how you kind of blend the academic classroom to the real-life experience. And so for years medicine and psychology has been building a bridge between the clinical experience and the academic study. And when David Shi discovered engaged learning, once I realized what he was talking about, (laughs) I know that Al Gore story about the internet. So I had an opportunity to go either into a hospital setting but the invitation came to join the staff of a very large Baptist church in Mobile, Alabama, the Dauphin Way Baptist Church. This was the first or second largest church east of the Mississippi. It was a little over 6,000 members and I went there as an assistant to [Pastor] Harold Seaver and was there for about two years from '63 to '65. And that again was a very formative experience on working on a staff, working in relationship to other ministers and to a senior minister. My responsibilities were pastoral care and counseling. If I went to the hospital I'd see 30 or 35 people. We had at least five funerals in one day. And the pastor, Dr. Seaver, believed that the way you really learned is by doing and then reflecting on it. So I was out of seminary one week and I had joined Harold's staff and I was, in a sense, the primary pastoral person in his absence. And this was in Mobile, Alabama, 1963, in February. And he left as my first responsibility to host the Alabama Baptist State Convention's Evangelism Conference. And this was two or three thousand preachers coming to Mobile and to the Dauphin Way Church. The second responsibility was to do all of the Sunday services, morning and evening, which were broadcast, and also do an afternoon television program. Well after that baptism you can be well aware that I was more than willing to break in. Glad you're home. (laughs) Let me tell you what I learned and what I need to know. But that was a great two years while we were in Mobile. My oldest son, Stewart, was born there and so that was a very special time within our own family. Finishing Dauphin Way, the opportunity there, they liked to have for a couple of years, and then you have

an opportunity to move on. And I finally accepted the call of the First Baptist Church at Fairfax, South Carolina. Now you need to know that in Mobile I was there during some of the racial crisis, so you need to have that whole mix. And then the Birmingham bombings were going on in that period of time. And then I moved to Fairfax which is in the low country of South Carolina. To give you a geographical orientation: if you go from Augusta, Georgia, to Charleston, draw a line; you go from Columbia to Savannah and draw a line; where those two lines intersect, like the railroads intersect, is Fairfax. This was a community – the church had about 750 members. And then also part of the opportunity at Fairfax was to serve as the pastor of the Beach Branch Baptist Church. But it was a separate call and these were just wonderful folks. They established their church in 1759. They built their building in 1825. And so while this young minister from Mobile, Alabama, and this very large church, was talking to these folks – and they probably had maybe 50 or 60 members – about 15 of them were college students, there was a very heavy emphasis in the low country on education. And they said, Jim, this was 1965, “Tell us your attitude about women in ministry.” And I said “Well, you know,” I said “I kind of believe in the autonomy of the local Baptist church and whoever the church sees as gifted should be affirmed regardless of their gender.” And they were pleased to hear that and they then introduced me to a woman who was sitting there who was Mrs. Ethel Rouse. Mrs. Rouse had been ordained a deacon in 1930. And they said “Now Jim, if you accept our call and come as pastor, if you need any help in terms of public praying Mrs. Rouse will be glad to pray but none of the men in our church pray publicly.” And the way I could have dismissed myself [inaudible]. And so here in the low country of South Carolina was a congregation that had – not out of trying to make any kind of statement of political correctness – this is who we are, these are the gifts, and this is who we have kind of affirmed. Also, during this period of time, with the integration of the schools, one of the families there had a number of blacks who were living on their place, this large tract of land. And without any opposition from the families, the family that owned the land, they, if not encouraged, offered no resistance to those families integrating the public school system. And so this man was challenged about this and he said “Well,” he said, “integration is sort of the law of the land and that’s the best I have to offer.” (laughs) These are good people. I was there from ’65 to ’67 at the First Baptist Church of Fairfax and the Beach Branch Baptist Church. Also during this period of time the racial tensions were really rising and there was an effort in our community in wanting to use the church to start a private school within the church. This gentleman came by the church and said, one Friday morning, “Jim, I brought you a check for \$10,000 and want us to start a private school.” And I said “Well, I really appreciate the check,” I said, “You know, we’re not doing a very good job about being a church so I don’t know how we’re going to go about being a school?” I said, “I don’t even know anything about that.” I said, “I do know that a school takes a lot of money. Could you come by every Friday with \$10,000?” He grabbed the check and walked out. The Ku Klux Klan, also at this particular time, was very active and they staged a rally outside of Fairfax. And so, you know, I thought, well, I needed to say something. But this was on a Saturday night and I waited until the following Sunday, eight days later, and preached a sermon that was broadcast on the local radio station against the

Klan, primarily on their misuse of Christian symbols like the cross and misreading of the Bible and all like that. What was interesting, during that period of time, is nobody in the church offered any vocal, public opposition to me. There was sort of an understanding of a free pulpit and that's our preacher. And to use, one of the things that I overheard one person say, "Well he just doesn't understand our niggers." You know, that was sort of how they discussed... But there was never any kind of public opposition to what I had said and they knew who I was and what I was about and also, by the way, had very good relationships with other ministers in the area, black and white, including had spoken several times in convocations for, then, the separate black high school, and all like that. And when I came to Greenville it turns out that the son of the principal of the black high school...

Dr. Tollison: Mr. [inaudible]?

Mr. Pitts: No, in Fairfax, was our local vet here, Dr. Bing. So Dr. Bing and I, we could all talk about family and all like that. It was interesting. As a result of my opposition to the Klan... A week later, on a Saturday night, I was working on my Saturday Night Special, I had kinda goofed around and hadn't done my sermon preparation, it was about 10:30 at night and a member of my congregation came and knocked on the side door of the study. And I opened it and welcomed him in and he said "I want to talk with you about your sermon, preacher." And so I said "Sure. Sit down." So we talked a minute. He said "Well, you know I'm a member of the Klan." And I said "No, I didn't know that." And I said "I don't believe you." 'Cause I knew the man's parents and the man's parents had worked with me in us doing an integrated RA Bible School for black children and so they had a very gracious, if not paternalistic, spirit for the community. And see when it came to the youth of the community it was 80% black, 20% white. So this just wasn't an academic thing this was, you know, a reality that we were living with in the Allendale/Fairfax area. So I didn't really believe him. He said "Well come on out, I'll show you." So I went out to his car and he showed me his robes and some of the literature and all like that. It turned out that he was second in command of the Klan for the state. And then for the next year and a half – as we had this friendship – it turned out he was also an undercover agent for SLED [South Carolina Law Enforcement Division]. And so about once every couple of weeks we would go through the Klan applications for the low country of South Carolina in my living room. (laughs) And it turned out that most of them claimed to be Baptists but they couldn't spell it. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Would you mind sharing that person's name?

Mr. Pitts: I think I really shouldn't, that it might be best not to. And then, also I became really rather empathetic with the Klan on this issue – is that, if you took out all the undercover and SLED people in it I don't know if we'd have a quorum, you know. And so it was very much interesting how this was very much kind of intermeshed there. And a number of the people who had joined the Klan were very worried and frightened and they were not necessarily, you know, demons all. But they were... See probably the low country of South Carolina was as close

to South Africa, you know, in terms of the whole ethos of it. I got into another crisis there since you're interested in kind of race. Lloyd and Ann Neil were a part of a family of Mrs. B.F. Thomas' children, Ann was, and her daughter, Miriam, was also a missionary in Hong Kong. Lloyd and Ann were out of the church as missionaries living in Nigeria. And so I decided – they were home on furlough – we'd do an "Lloyd and Ann Neil" day. Well, little did I know, I was kind of walking backwards into a crisis because by celebrating Lloyd and Ann Neil I was celebrating relationships with blacks and people that were working as missionaries and this stirred up some stuff in the church too. But my feeling was "Hey, you know, these are our sons and daughters and we're really proud of them and we believe in kind of missions and what they're doing." Ann later told me that this was the only time that, in the history of her home congregation, she was ever really that publicly affirmed. And see, also maybe an insight here is we talk a lot today about globalization and crossing lines and all like that. Well, Baptists have been doing that for a long time in missions, you know. And even when we get into the history of Furman with the Poteat family and all like that in terms of missions. And we can talk a bit later about Gordon Poteat and all like that.

Dr. Tollison: He set the precedence to pursue mission work, didn't he?

Mr. Pitts: That's right. And his son, later, I hosted him when he was in his 90s to come back and speak. So this idea of globalization which was a new kind of a corporate economic thing, the Christian community has been about for a long, long time, transcending these sorts of, kind of nationalistic, you know, boundaries. But in Fairfax I had those particular kind of run-ins. Another thing that was very formative for me was a gentleman by the name of Howard McClain who was the director of the South Carolina Christian Action Council. And Howard, by the way, talking about family here, was a very good friend of Clarence and Florence Jordan of Koinonia Farm. I don't know if we could fill you in...

Dr. Tollison: [inaudible]

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. [inaudible]

Dr. Tollison: Habitat for Humanity [inaudible]

Mr. Pitts: [inaudible] See, I knew Millard before he started Habitat.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Pitts: Martin and Maybelline and Clarence and Florence Jordan started Koinonia Farm. Well they were very good friends to Howard McClain. Howard was running the South Carolina Christian Action Council which was kind of an inter-racial, ecumenical initiative. And Howard came to see me and we developed a friendship. I still laugh that I was out of money but I found the keys to the

church Coke machine and we all [inaudible] track stolen Cokes from the Coke machine. And Howard invited me into a network of relationships that were ecumenical – this was about the time of Vatican II and all like that. By the way, Howard was also a Baptist and so there is a tradition within the Baptist life of very much of an ecumenical kind of spirit. And so I was kind of nurtured and... By the way, I think Howard was one of the people that helped me connect when I was relating to the Klan with SLED and all like that, so there was kind of an informal network there. So my life was very much shaped by people like that. So, in August of 1967 I was pretty weary and I just thought kind of beat up in some ways of what I was dealing with and I tease people that I would have accepted even an invitation to sell Fuller Brushes, just to go ahead, and there must be another way to live. And I received a phone call from L.D. Johnson and L.D. had had a conversation with Joe King, a professor of Church History here at Furman. And L.D. had come on board in late spring of '67. And, by the way, L.D. came out of a crisis at First Baptist Church over race.

Dr. Tollison: Would you mind talking about that a little bit as well?

Mr. Pitts: Sure. L.D. had been at First Baptist, I'm trying to think of when he came, probably '62 or so. He had come from the University of Richmond to First Baptist. He had gone on a preaching mission to Germany with the Air Force or some other group. And while he was gone some folks that were members of the First Baptist Church decided that their pastor was too liberal when it came to race relations and began this campaign to get rid of L.D. And so L.D. finally realized that before some of this changed he would be an old man with a beard down to his knees. And so Frank Bonner, who was then the Academic Dean and VP, who later became the Provost at Furman, dearly loved L.D. And we were in a transition in the campus ministry area here at Furman and so he saw to it that L.D. was named as the chaplain and then L.D. had to put together his staff and he heard about me from Joe. And so I was getting ready to do a funeral, and a dear, dear friend of mine in the church – I've always had, I guess 'cause of my family history, an interest in addiction and all like that and this was one of my local alcoholic women that had died – and so I was getting ready to do this woman's service and L.D. called on the phone and I thought it was a joke. I thought it was a friend of mine, Posey Belcher, up at Varnville, just kind of his, kind of the morning joke or something and L.D. assured me that this was L.D. Johnson. And we didn't know each other, you know, I knew of him and since finishing Furman I'd been back on the campus one time for a visit for some sort of meeting. So I wasn't one of the Furman folks that graduated that couldn't stay away.

Dr. Tollison: Did you have a negative...?

Mr. Pitts: No, it was just, kind of just moved on, that's right. I just hadn't been even back, you know, other than that one visit. And so L.D. and I, he invited me to come up and we hit it off. I believe either in two or three weeks I came to work at Furman. And, it was kind of interesting, my initial day on the job was a pre-school retreat up at a camp on the Saluda River. And the way the students had

as a way of welcoming people then, they would throw you into the lake or into the river. So I got out of my car and these students kind of surrounded me and greeted me and grabbed me and threw me into the river. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Oh my god, [inaudible]

Mr. Pitts: So I had a real cold-water baptism that time and fortunately – I don't really swim that well – but fortunately I could get out. And by the way, that idea of throwing people into the lake was part of the tradition here at Furman. It continues somewhat. But even Gordon Blackwell was thrown into the lake.

Dr. Tollison: Really.

Mr. Pitts: That's right. Oh, that's right.

Dr. Tollison: So this started in the 50s, late 50s?

Mr. Pitts: Right. We got here, in terms of the lake, you know.

Dr. Tollison: It was a first day engagement.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, engagement. It was just a way of kind of celebrating community. You've heard about community?

Dr. Tollison: Oh yeah.

Mr. Pitts: Well we had community even back then but we didn't know what to call it. We were kind of the Furman family.

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about Gordon Blackwell being thrown in. Do you remember the circumstances?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. I didn't actually witness that. But that was just something that was kind of done. And you, hopefully, were prepared but if not you were going in anyway. So my first day at Furman I was thrown into the Saluda River so I was properly baptized. And Furman then was probably into its ninth year of the quote "new campus." One of my responsibilities early on – Furman was very insistent that anyone involved in the campus was not, in a sense, contracted in from the outside – so one of my responsibilities was to look after the Baptist Student Union. And so we generally would have a person from the state office that does that. No Furman says "We'll do that and we want to have the responsibility, you know, for that." And so I worked very closely as the assistant and associate chaplain with the BSU. The first social dance on campus was sponsored by the BSU and it was integrated. And the administration was sure that the sky would fall. But the chaplains were the promoters of social dancing on the Furman campus.

Dr. Tollison: Integrated to the extent that the African American students here attended.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, oh yeah.

Dr. Tollison: Not anybody from the outside.

Mr. Pitts: No, they were here. That's what I mean, it was a Furman event.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Pitts: And also the BSU had African American as well as, you know, regular members. It was just a blend and the reason I was pausing is that one of the people who was very active in the BSU at that time was also a native of Hong Kong. So we just didn't discover diversity then, it was there.

Dr. Tollison: Wasn't Joe Vaughn an officer?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, Joe Vaughn was an officer and the pastor advisor – who is now kind of would have the role of campus minister – to the BSU, was a local pastor. Oh let's see, he was pastor of... David... he was pastor of the Springfield Baptist Church, I'm pulling a blank on David's last name... it'll come to me. But David was very active, by the way, in the civil rights movement here in the Greenville area and also worked with the BSU here as the pastor advisor. One of my memories that's so interesting, we were doing what we used to call "dorm rap sessions." And we would take a faculty member and a chaplain and, you know, another person or so, maybe two or three adults onto a residence hall dorm about ten o'clock at night. We would carry a case of Pepsi and a stack of several, four or five dozen, boxes of Krispy Kreme Donuts and just sit in the hall and talk to whoever wants to come. (laughs) [inaudible] So anyway, David and I were sitting there with a young Philosophy professor who was very liberal spirited – David Francis was the gentleman's name – and he said to David Francis. He said "You know I don't have any black friends. Would you be my friend?" And David looked at him and said "I don't think so." He said "I just don't want to be a friend of someone who needs a black friend." He said "Now if we had something in common, then we could be friends." But David was a dear, dear friend. The Springfield Baptist Church during that period of time burned and so Furman made available the McAlister Auditorium for the Springfield Church for several months until they could work out a situation where they could...

Dr. Tollison: Really, a local African American church?

Mr. Pitts: A very significant African American church that, perhaps, is more significant in the black community than First Baptist is in the white community. This is a – funny, being my solicitous self, I was over there and I was in with the organist. I said "Would you like for us to get the Furman organist with your church organist?" And David said "Well, you know, that would be okay," he said, "but our organist finished Julliard. I think she could probably manage the organ."

(laughs) And then I said “David, what about the PA system and stuff?” He said “Oh yeah, we could use the PA but,” he said, “when I start driving you can just turn that thing off.” (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: What year was this?

Mr. Pitts: This was probably in the late 60s when the Springfield Baptist Church had their crisis and they were here. But there was always that sort of relationship, but it was a relationship based on friendship and a common commitment. We weren't trying to, in a sense, this wasn't done for marketing or public relations.

Dr. Tollison: Was that during Gordon Blackwell's?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. Well see Gordon Blackwell was very much a part of that, but who really the leader of race at Furman, I would say, I would have to give credit to Frank Bonner and what Dr. Bonner did.

Dr. Tollison: In terms of allowing Joe Vaughn to...

Mr. Pitts: Well not only allowing, but promoting and encouraging and selecting Joe, selected Joe. And then a guy by the name of Ernie Harrill, who was the dean of students, Ernie and others. And Ernie did a lot of work in terms of race relations within Greenville too. But there was just a network of support and friendship that, even to this day... Well for instance, at eleven fifteen last night I was talking with a very, very, probably one of my closest friends, is Dr. Grady Butler who is on the school board. And Grady's brother, T.C., was killed in an accident on Saturday night, Sunday morning. And I did the services for Grady Sunday at his church. Yes, Grady called me at eight o'clock and said “Jim, this time can you fill in?” And so there is sort of a network and our friendship with Jesse Jackson and all like that, this is just a part of who we are and who we've kind of been. But it's not something that we have sat down and come up with a list, it's just what we are and who we're about. Oh, here, while I'm speaking of race, let me just share one thing that I'm very, very proud that we were able to do. I was lecturing one morning in my Introduction to Biblical Literature class and was talking about the prophets and the role of the prophets and the prophetic personality. And I asked the class, I said “Tell me,” I said, “Who would have sort of a prophetic witness in terms of American culture?” And everybody was kind of vegetating and so I kind of suggested “Well what about the life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King?” And one young man who was extremely bright and argumentative said “Oh no, he wouldn't be a prophet. He was simply kind of a protester and rabble rouser.” And so we got to talking and I said “Well, you know Dr. King was a Baptist minister.” Well he said “Oh no, he wasn't that, he was not at all that.” And so I realized, you know, after class I talked to my colleague, Jeff Rogers, who was then on the Religion faculty, and what had transpired. And he said “Ask this student where he went to high school and did he go to a public school or to a private school?” And so I called the student and asked him and he said he went to a public school. And in public education the

fact that Dr. King is a minister is not even mentioned. And so this guy was operating with an honest deck, he did not know. So during that class that day, already I'd said "Well, listen, I have a friend that knew Dr. King, who was jailed with him, my friend Grady Butler." I said "I'm gonna give him a call. If he can come out, I want him to kind of talk about the whole history of the prophetic movement in terms of the American Civil Rights movement." And so I got Grady on the phone and said "Grady, we got some mission work to do." (laughs) And so he came out and did his thing and we realized there is such a gulf and gap in terms of understanding. To use a quote from L.D. Johnson "We're never more than a generation away from the jungle." And so the idea of memory by young people is extremely limited. And, you know, I could talk about, you know, World War II and Korea, you know, Vietnam, and I could be talking about the Civil War, I mean this just has no relevance in terms of their life. Even one day I was talking about, let's see, I made a reference to Selma, Alabama. And President Clinton had been there over the weekend and I mentioned something about this as sort of a reference. Nobody in the class had ever heard of Selma, Alabama. Nobody in the class knew nothing about the civil rights history and the Selma march. It was a blank. So, to make a long story short, Grady and I decided that one of the ways that we would try to address this is we would do an annual civil rights tour. Now this wasn't to be a high-end luxury tour. This wasn't to be a concert tour. We were just going to get some folks from Furman who were students on a bus and we were going to spend a week on the road.

Dr. Tollison: Yeah, I almost went.

Mr. Pitts: Did you?

Dr. Tollison: I got sick at the last minute.

Mr. Pitts: You were gonna do the bus trip?

Dr. Tollison: I was gonna go my junior year, I think, junior or senior year. I was very familiar with it.

Mr. Pitts: Okay. This, by the way, we built in stress and hardship. You know we left at midnight from the Garden Room of the Chapel and we rode all night on a bus. And then we got to, oh, went up to Northern Pierre and came back. I remember we all spent some time with Will Campbell and all like that. And we went to Selma and to Birmingham and to Memphis and all like that. In recruiting for the trip – you'll find this interesting – there was two young African American women came to see me and I was telling them about it. We were gonna sleep on church floors. We only did one night in a motel which was the night before we came home to sort of clean up. But we kind of slept on church floors. By the way, rolling out of bed is easier than getting up off a floor at my age. (laughs) But Grady and I, you know... And between Grady and I, we really in a sense had a network of folks. We were outside of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and waiting to go in and this door kind of cracked open and this man looked out.

And the guy said “Grady!” And he said “Deacon Nesbitt!” [Robert D. Nesbitt] And so he opened the door and embraced Grady and welcomed us in. Nesbitt was chairman of the deacons that called Dr. King as pastor. Took us all through that process. See Vernon Johns had been the pastor. Are you familiar with Vernon Johns? Oh we need to get a news sheet of Vernon. Vernon Johns is... Matter of fact, I’ll get you a video of Vernon’s story that James Earl Jones does. Vernon Johns was pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. This was a “silk stocking” Baptist church in the shadows of the Montgomery State Capitol. And Vernon had really been hard on the people about the whole social justice issues. And to make a long story short, Vernon finally left the church and went somewhere else and the congregation was so relieved. “Now we can get somebody who won’t stress us and embarrass us.” And they’d heard about the young Martin Luther King, Jr., and went over, as Deacon Nesbitt says, to visit with his daddy. And they ate porkchops and talked to this young man and knew he was quite bright and that he’d be a real asset to their community. So they called Martin Luther King, Jr., as the pastor. Well Dr. King didn’t come into Montgomery with an idea of really, kind of, leading the march or crusades. He came in and he was the only one in the African American community that wasn’t already polarized in the various factions. So the factions came together to choose him as the spokesperson. Anyway Grady and I did the civil rights tour and I was trying to promote it to these young African American women, about sleeping on church floors and going to Tuskegee and Selma and all that kind of stuff. And they finally thanked me for the presentation about the trip but they decided they’d rather go on the cruise instead during the spring break. (laughs) Only Furman students, you know. I said “Well I didn’t know that was an option.” I said, “Can’t go with you.” But that again was another what we’d call engaged or experiential learning and it wasn’t... Also, I don’t think learning has to be done for academic credit. There’s ways... Sometimes I tell students there are things more important for you to do today than coming to class, you know. What can you really be about that’s gonna further your educational experience? Sometimes when I was hosting various speakers and would involve students with them I thought it was much more important for them to... Well, for instance, I hosted John Kerry when he came home from Vietnam.

Dr. Tollison: You were the one that brought him to campus?

Mr. Pitts: The chaplains did.

Dr. Tollison: What year was that?

Mr. Pitts: ’71, ’72, you know.

Dr. Tollison: They have a photograph upstairs.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, but to keep moving to the next level, as we say, some of these... I hosted... I got to know Jimmy Carter through a Baptist State Convention connection and he came when he was an early candidate for the presidency and

I had a hard time getting anybody within the administration come even speak to him.

Dr. Tollison: Where did he? Did he speak to the...

Mr. Pitts: He spoke to a convocation, one of our Religion and Life convocations when we did those in the morning.

Dr. Tollison: Where did he speak from?

Mr. Pitts: In McAlister.

Dr. Tollison: McAlister. And what year was that?

Mr. Pitts: Probably '75, something like that, you know. Hosted Billy Graham. Had a hard time getting people to come hear Billy.

Dr. Tollison: Really?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. It was in the afternoon when we had him, you know. Oh, here's a fun story. One of my dearest friends was Sam Proctor, bless his memory. Sam, among his opportunities, is he helped start the Peace Corps and ran the African portion of the Peace Corps, was professor of Education at Rutgers, and also pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. Well Sam was down to lecture for us and he had, again, you know, his history of civil rights in terms of his book is – I think he calls it [inaudible] *The Negro in America* [*The Young Negro in America*] – is a significant work on the history of civil rights. As Sam was lecturing – this was back during the streaking phase – two Furman male students, we're confident they're male, naked with ski masks on and tennis shoes ran from audience right to audience left across the stage streaking and then jumped in a car and left. I've since learned who these people were but it took me twenty years and an alumni function. And so as Sam was lecturing when these guys ran, you know, buck naked across the McAllister stage – I wasn't sitting on the stage, I was sitting in the audience at that time, L.D. Johnson was on the platform – and afterwards Sam came off and he had a wonderful, only the right minister would have as a phrase, "I feel like I've been throwing imitation pearls before a real swine." (laughs) And then I got back to my office and Alester Furman called me. He had heard about this on the radio and he wanted to know who those two young men were. And I wondered if they were part of his own progeny, his grandsons. (laughs) But whoever they were, that they didn't need to be here and so he sent me 2,000 copies of a Readers Digest reprint of an article on manners that he wanted me to give to the Furman students. The chaplains' office probably still has some of these stored away in the cabinet. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Wow. That's an interesting way to handle it.

Mr. Pitts: Also during those early years in '67, '68, hosted Clarence Jordan. He was here to speak about Koinonia Farm. Among that time we hosted Benjamin Mays. Dr. Mays, I had him speak the evening before in a conference room of the student center and worked very, very hard at promoting the event and had thirteen students show up to hear Dr. Mays tell his life story.

Dr. Tollison: He was president of Morehouse?

Mr. Pitts: Morehouse College. And talked about being thrown off the train in Greenville during the civil rights, you know, the Jim Crow stuff. And then he spoke the following morning in a convocation. Often we would have somebody do something more informally the night before and then the larger convocation.

Dr. Tollison: Was SSOC [Southern Student Organizing Committee] supportive of these types of... Did they participate in...

Mr. Pitts: The SSOC, yeah. You were interested in about the student protest era.

Dr. Tollison: Mmm hmm.

Mr. Pitts: First, that was a good time. That was an exciting time. And one of the things that Furman students had then was a sense of hope. They really gave a damn and they were really willing to kind of be engaged. And often, in terms after we would have a speaker, our policy was always we would have what we called a dialog or feedback session to anyone who wants to come, can come and, you know, talk with, meet, and even argue with the speaker. And the students at that particular time were very much engaged. I'd say the current generation is much more self-absorbed, much more personally, vocationally interested, and really don't have an awful lot of hope. There's a lot more kind of cynicism. They're not sure they can make a difference but what can I do for me and my own. That was a very heady, heady time. One thing that comes to memory – and I haven't thought about this in years – this young man was in my office and he came by to let me know his plans for the coming day and he was leaving the campus after talking with me but wanted me to know that he was going to Charleston and he was going with his kayak. And so he got in Charleston Harbor with his kayak and blocked the U.S. Navy for about a day from leaving Charleston Harbor. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Wow. Oh my

Mr. Pitts: Or let me tell you a time that I felt very, very, I guess, guilty. A young woman who – by the way, who's uncle is a Baptist minister, friend of mine – she got very much concerned about nuclear energy and, especially, the Aiken situation. And I was lying in bed at eleven o'clock and watching the evening news and this Furman student was being arrested there at the gates of Aiken, you know, and this had been a woman that I knew and liked and loved and had encouraged. And I thought, you know, here I am, you know, sleeping in this good clean bed

and my friend's going to jail, you know, it really kind of...

Dr. Tollison: Wow. That's early 70s right?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. This was a very exciting time. Another thing going on at that period of time was the Vietnam War. The chaplains had a kind of interesting role there. One: is our ROTC Department had the responsibility for notification of next of kin regarding deaths. We learned that there was no support system for these guys who became dear friends. And, by the way, one of the guys, later, who was here, who was a dear friend, was one of the people that helped bring to light the My Lai Massacre. And he had served and he was really just outraged by what he observed first hand coming into that scene.

Dr. Tollison: Was he a Furman graduate?

Mr. Pitts: He was a Furman ROTC professor.

Dr. Tollison: Do you remember his name?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah but I [inaudible]. So we had this kind of network. And anyway, we would spend Friday mornings during the Vietnam War, generally with coffee, with the ROTC staff and just, in a sense you'd say, letting them debrief and talk about their responsibilities and what they had undergone that week and, just simply, just grieve and cry with them.

Dr. Tollison: Wow.

Mr. Pitts: But they were the ones, beginning at 6 a.m., that had to be knocking on doors and letting folks know that their son had been killed in Vietnam.

Dr. Tollison: I'm not exactly... I don't know that I completely understand who their constituency was. Was it Furman? Was it Greenville community?

Mr. Pitts: No, it was the whole Greenville County.

Dr. Tollison: It was Greenville County.

Mr. Pitts: That's right. Anyone that was killed. And this was their assignment. And even when we were beginning the Iraq engagement this last time I had meetings with ROTC people and they had no memory of, that this would be part of... What had been their assignment, I don't know...

Dr. Tollison: It is no longer.

Mr. Pitts: I don't know, but they were clueless when, after I went over to kind of see them, about "Hey if this were to come about let us know how we can be supportive of you all." I remember going to get a girl out of class whose husband

was killed.

Dr. Tollison: Oh, wow.

Mr. Pitts: What's also kind of interesting at that period of time – a couple of us were talking about this the other day – we had the lottery about the draft. And to be over in one of the – see where everybody had a TV in their room, you had a TV down in the lounge area – and to be with a hundred or so Furman students as they're watching the lottery on television and realizing that this is not just academic but this, where they rank in this, had something to do with where they're going to be in terms of their own vulnerability. And if we were to reactivate the draft, I think also, the impact that this would have on the Furman community, even among women who then would be vulnerable. So the idea of a great wall separating us from this other thing was always being torn down by what was happening in the larger world.

Dr. Tollison: What was the general consensus? I mean we hear these sort of highlights about SSOC and the rallies and the Furman University Corps of Kazoos demonstration and the [inaudible] stuff. But, if you had to throw it in a category or even divide it percentage-wise, was there still a very conservative element, was this an unusual, was it a small faction that was...?

Mr. Pitts: Okay, I'd say that basically any kind of vocal thing like that may not involve more than fifteen or twenty percent of the people.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Pitts: But there was a general sensitivity to that and there was also a sense of vulnerability that almost all people felt. It did not just, it was just not over there, but it was here and it was affecting me and my people that we know. And also, I have found that quote "conservative religious students" often have a higher sense of social ethic and social justice. These were the ones, for instance, the BSU [Baptist Student Union] back in those early days, they thought it was kind of a waste of time to have general meetings because they were so much involved in the community and doing their various projects within the community and with soup kitchens and missions and all like that. So it was a very socially active time. And, by the way, there is no way that we can give enough thanks and praise to Betty Alverson and what she did with CESC [Collegiate Educational Service Corps]. And I hope that she would be on your interview list because Betty, Betty's legacy, probably has had more impact on Furman students than anybody I can think of. And what we have now is simply just a shadow of what was.

Dr. Tollison: In what ways?

Mr. Pitts: Involvement of students, numbers and all like that.

Dr. Tollison: Is that the direct result of the fact that Betty Alverson is not here?

Mr. Pitts: I think that is one of the issues. There have been... Some systemic changes have been made within Furman too.

Dr. Tollison: Do you hear a lot of [inaudible]?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. Basically Betty was very strong on "If you say you're gonna do it, do it. If you're not gonna do it, don't say you are." So she didn't like a lot of excuses. Also, she was a firm believer in "pure" volunteerism; the reason why you're doing that because it's the right and decent thing to do. You're not doing this to fulfill a scholarship. You're not doing this to earn a grade. You're doing this because you're a caring, decent human being. And generation after generation she was able to get that message across. And I think now we see that the way, to me the reward was just the intrinsic feeling that you were doing a decent thing. Now the idea is that somehow this has to do with my scholarship or grade or kind of something else, you know. But Betty would never allow academic credit or financial reward be a part of the reward. It was because you were a volunteer. And at one time it had 65, or more, agencies involved in it and we did one study that perhaps half of all Furman students had some involvement within CESC.

Dr. Tollison: Very impressive.

Mr. Pitts: It really is. I'm trying to think where we were... We were talking about the whole idea of the ethos of the campus is generally set by a minority of people I would say.

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about Joe Vaughn a little bit.

Mr. Pitts: Okay. Sure

Dr. Tollison: What was your relationship with him or your memories of him?

Mr. Pitts: Well my final memory is I was one of the ministers that did Joe's funeral. And out of that we carried over something that I tried to communicate to the young people that were in the gospel choir. At the Love Feast, the Christmas Love Feast every year, the benediction or, to use circus language, the blow off is we would have the gospel choir sing "Soon and Very Soon I'm Off to See the King." And how that came about is that was what we sang on the recessional coming out of Joe's funeral, you know. "Soon and very soon we're off to see the King"

Dr. Tollison: Now he wasn't a member of the gospel choir.

Mr. Pitts: No. See Joe was warm, loving, delightful, funny. He didn't have an edge. Joe loved life, liked people, was a very wonderful educator. I remember Joe was out here for some event not long before his kind of death and when I hugged him it

would be just like bones, you know, I knew he was a very sick person then. But Joe, there are lots of, you know, stories about Joe, you know, doing various kinds of stunts in the dorm. He was a cheerleader and just a... And then again, another person that would be good to talk to about Joe is Lillian Brock Flemming. And Lillian, she kind of jokes that the reason why she came to Furman is Joe needed someone to date. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about, I want to talk about that a little bit more. I've talked with a few of the other African American students that were here around this time – one of whom spent about a year here and transferred, she was [inaudible] transferred, I think, to Michigan, I don't remember, this was several years ago – saying that she wasn't comfortable here on campus. And I was trying to compare her experience with Joe Vaughn's experience. And I was talking to her and she was saying that Joe Vaughn handled things in a way that she wasn't necessarily comfortable with and that she thought that he may have even taken too lighthearted approach, an approach to how whites at the time thought of African Americans. Meaning: he was a cheerleader, he made himself the butt of jokes, making people laugh, this kind of stuff. She wasn't comfortable with it. Did you sense that? Did you sense that it had...

Mr. Pitts: No, I think – here's where I would make kind of a distinction – is that Furman and Joe and the BSU, just used that as another case in point, believed in integration. And we saw ourselves as committed to that sort of commonality. We were trying to rise above tribalism and to be one people, one community. And we saw ourselves as believers as all God's children and that it wasn't a black or white issue for us. Let me tell a brief story that illustrates this. We had a director of Minority Affairs – I think it's before it became Multi-Cultural Affairs – and he was doing a welcome to Furman students and I was to follow him. And he did a welcome and that, kind of like, could be translated "Black is beautiful. White is bad," and how he hoped that someday a graduate of Howard University in Washington could become president of the United States. Well, I had to follow this person. And so I got up and I called him by name and I said "You know," I said, "we just live in two different worlds." I said "You live in a black and white world." I said – to kind of quote Jesse [Jackson] – I said "I live in a rainbow." And I said "I think that this sort of black and white kind of game is not gonna get us where we need to be." And I said "Apparently what you're saying is that these young people have made the wrong decision by coming to Furman because they didn't go to Howard." I said "I don't know who'd want to be president of the United States, but if any of these folks would, more power to 'em." But I said "I guess I just rather go with Jesse than with you." And, by the way, afterwards a number of African American students came up and just thanked me. And so I would like to transcend tribalism. And this sort of us-against-them stuff is not gonna get us where we need to be. And of course, as you have heard, even in a contemporary context how – I'm trying to think of the guy's name – Bill Cosby's recent statement – who was hosted by Jesse Jackson when he made the statement; and I've heard Jesse make the same statements when I've been with Jesse, the only white face in a black room; and that Spike Lee agrees with that too – is that we have to transcend this sort of us-against-

them and blame game and how can we kind of get our act together and kind of move on as human beings.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think – I'm gonna broach some sensitive topics so...

Mr. Pitts: Sure. Go on (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Gonna get real for this. If you don't feel comfortable [inaudible].

Mr. Pitts: Sure.

Dr. Tollison: There have been allegations that, in so many ways Joe Vaughn was the perfect person to handle all, I mean, would have been, undoubtedly be tons of pressure, that it took its toll on him. Underneath the surface and behind closed doors he began to abuse alcohol. And that there was also, perhaps, even added to the pressure of him being the only African American student here, he identified as a homosexual. And where this was not accepted, or was not even talked about or recognized. Do you have any comments?

Mr. Pitts: Well, see, I knew all those things, you know. And, as I mentioned, even embracing him, you know, and thought that he may be suffering from Aids, I didn't know that. But let's use as case in point Lillian Brock Flemming. She's mayor pro tem of Greenville, you know. And so to blame Furman for Joe's vulnerabilities or disease of addiction or whatever these things are, you know. And I've spent all my life working with addictive people including Furman administrators, faculty, students and staff, you know. And so I think we have some equal opportunity problems here but I would not want to fault Furman for that. Nor would I want to say, necessarily, that Lillian Brock Flemming's success is all due to Furman either. So I think that we have had some good folks come here and they've had, you know, their life experiences and, hopefully, this was a positive, formative experience for them. But I never saw Joe as an idol, I saw Joe as a friend, you know. And I have lots of friends and my friends have, to use a Biblical metaphor, 'have this treasure in earthen vessels,' you know, so they're not perfect, you know.

Dr. Tollison: Right. Behind closed doors, I mean, if he was being completely honest with you, what do you think he would say about his Furman experience? Or what did he say?

Mr. Pitts: I think it was a formative experience for him.

Dr. Tollison: In what sense?

Mr. Pitts: In that it helped shape him to become the person that he was.

Dr. Tollison: And who did he become?

Mr. Pitts: Well, he became, I thought, a person who was a successful educator, who meant a great deal to a number of kids in terms of high school and the community. But I never saw him as anything other than a caring, decent human being and child of God.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think he struggled? Do you think the experience here or portions of it haunted him later?

Mr. Pitts: I think we all struggle as college students. This is a faith formation and personal formation time. Remember I studied Psychology here, trying to get my life together as the adult child of an alcoholic. And how do you turn your life experiences from negatives to positives, you know. But if I were to follow my heritage I would be out in the parking lot stealing hubcaps off of cars, you know. But I mean you make choices and you deal with life and then, with the grace of God and the encouragement of friends, you deal with what you have to deal with, you know.

Dr. Tollison: So should Joe's comments about "Furman and I were a perfect fit." I don't remember any negative racial incidents. In one sense I hear him saying "I don't remember any negative racial incidents." And then, in another sense, you know I've heard stories about guys in the room above him in the dorms bouncing basketballs, keeping him up all night and things like that.

Mr. Pitts: Sure. But, see also, I can name you other stunts of college students over the years, you know. And even the college student that I went to take a gun away from in the dorm and I kind of wondered "Furman's not paying me enough money to take a bullet," you know. And so, the things that, again, occur within a community and within a community of young adults and within the lives of people who are immature. But I never saw Joe as perfect. I saw Joe as 'Joe Vaughn who was one of the first African Americans.' But I also see Lillian and see these other folks too. But what was different is that we were together.

Dr. Tollison: So to what extent should those comments be taken at face value?

Mr. Pitts: What, his being a perfect fit?

Dr. Tollison: Mmm hmm.

Mr. Pitts: I think that he had a positive experience at Furman.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Pitts: Was a positive experience at Furman. But that doesn't mean that everything was wonderful.

Dr. Tollison: Certainly.

Mr. Pitts: And, that I've had a wonderful experience at Furman but there were some things that I did... Probably the majority of what I did I would do for free. But there were some other things, like sitting in administrative meetings and all like that or grading papers, that's what I was getting paid to do, you know.

Dr. Tollison: Right. Gotcha.

Mr. Pitts: See the difference is now is I think there was a greater belief in integration, you know, than what I call 'us-against-them tribalization.' And see, that's where, I guess, I and some of my other even African American friends are out of step. Because, see, we're for integration and we don't see living in the ghetto as a way to solve problems. Let me just kind of walk out on a limb for a minute. I'm very much upset in terms of... I'm very much involved in the Middle East crisis. I have much sympathy for the people in the Middle East and think that the 'ghetto-izing' by the [Ariel] Sharon government in building the wall is the worst thing that could happen. Because I don't think Jews should live in ghettos, nor should we be putting Palestinians in ghettos. And somehow we're going to have to transcend this tribalism and how do we say "Hey folks, we're on the same piece of real estate, how do we become a united people?" And transcend... Well, for instance, back to my friend – and we were doing the kind of dialog in front of the students about 'black and white' versus 'the rainbow' – I confessed in that meeting that I had some real trouble, is that this person could trace his ancestry all the way back to Africa. And I'm struggling. My family tree breaks down right with my great grandfather. I don't know where he came from, where he went. My mother's situation was so strange. And I hear English, Irish, probably Indian in terms of Native Americans and all like that. But see, I don't know, you know, where my ancestors came from, but see that doesn't make any difference. The question is who am I? Where am I and what am I doing now? And so trading off of this history, of ancestral history, I think is a dead end for most folks.

Dr. Tollison: What do you think the race relations between students, even faculty, are at Furman today? For instance...

Mr. Pitts: Yeah.

Dr. Tollison: In my class this past spring, the African American women, when they were in the room they were always sitting together talking only to each other. And then when I was a student here, going to the dining hall, I had a few African American friends but they were all sitting together.

Mr. Pitts: I guess where it is, I'd say maybe there is a tendency in our culture right now of us against them and too much for being kind of tribal.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think it's regressed?

Mr. Pitts: Oh yeah. Oh of course yeah. I'd say basically comparing now to the late 60s,

there was a lot more energy and optimism and hope among students, you know.

Dr. Tollison: So when do you think Furman hit its peak in terms of an integrated, truly integrated, social experience?

Dr. Pitts: I don't know. I would say that those early years were great years. Those were exciting years. But, see Furman reflects the larger culture. I think another ingredient that would impact Furman has to do with the social-economic background of Furman students. In the days that I was kind of reminiscing about, of the late 60s and early 70s, more and more, most of our young people came from the region. They came from small towns. They had generally grew up in the church. So this meant that there was already some background and social orientation and they were really beginning to kind of emerge and kind of blossom. Now I see that more and more of our folks come from great levels of affluence and suburbia. They haven't necessarily had the confidence... They haven't had the confidence building experiences that young people have that often are raised in small towns. As an aside, one person was, I was talking to them about coming to Furman and he was in a state of great anxiety because he had failed to bring me his resume – this is a high school senior. And I said “Well that's okay.” I said “Let's just kind of talk.” And I said “I'm not too interested in what you have done but kind of tell me who you are and what you kind of like in terms of college.” He could hardly focus. And then two days later I got by FedEx an eight-page resume on this high school senior of 'how great he art.' (laughs) And so, to me, one of the challenges, I think, that Furman faces these days – and, by the way, this is something that Furman is unwilling to address – is how do we educate children of affluence, children of the rich.

Dr. Tollison: They're just unwilling to address that?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah.

Dr. Tollison: They're unwilling to admit that it does go on?

Mr. Pitts: Well, in terms I've tried with the Council Support Group, with the various faculty seminars and all like that, to have this for faculty and staff, a series on relating to children of the rich, you know. And I think there is a definite socio-demographic situations if we're working with people from Iraq or Iran, or from ghettos, except these people are coming from an affluent ghetto. How do we connect and relate to them. And most of us who are faculty and administrators don't fear that particular background. And I don't want to do this for marketing or public relations purposes, how do we help the people here. For instance, I had a young woman finishing Furman. Her initial opportunity, finishing Furman, was at a salary higher than my salary and she was really worried about how she was going to live as a single adult on that salary. Now my challenge was how do I empathetically relate to her – this was a genuine concern – and not just say “Well you're just some sort of rich bitch and get over it” you know. But how do I

kind of relate to that and not bring any, you know, how do I bring empathy and substance to that.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Pitts: Or another friend of mine, he was from an upper middle class family, dating a young woman from Atlanta...

CHANGE TAPE

Dr. Tollison: I'm interested in why you think...

Mr. Pitts: Why doesn't Furman want to address that?

Dr. Tollison: You say Furman doesn't want to address that. Do you think...

Mr. Pitts: Well, when I say in that the people, the networks of people that I have been involved with, and even this spring out of a session I was talking to some folks and said "You know we really need to do this, don't we." "Yeah, but we're not able to do that."

Dr. Tollison: Why do you think that?

Mr. Pitts: I don't know. Maybe it's one of the things that's kind of, like the elephant in the living room, one of those things that we really can't address. And to me it's part of our ethos and culture, and how do we connect and relate to these folks as if – if I was working with any other kind of group I'd need to go to school on their history and culture and how they look at life and how they go about valuing things.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think that there's a concern, maybe a marketing and PR concern that perhaps it's not... I mean being politically correct in having a well-rounded socio-economic... or develop a diverse socio-economic student body is fundamentally, in many ways, is incompatible with the size of tuition prices. It's not necessarily good PR for Furman to be touting this.

Mr. Pitts: I think basically public relations is a very significant factor in how we make decisions but that's across the board. A funny kind of a religious story I just happened to think about – I mentioned about young people that have kind of grown up in the church – in my Introduction to Biblical Literature class I said "If you're at a baseball or football game and someone holds up a sign that says 'John 3:16,' what's that mean?" Nobody in my class knew. There was that level of Biblical illiteracy. And then in another class there was one moment – oh gosh – it was this lock down in fundamentalism. And every day it was pick up the ball and fight this young woman. And finally she blurted out in class one day "Oh how I wish I could have had this class with you last fall, it would have been so much fun." And I said "How would it have been fun then and not now?" She said

“Well I wasn’t a Christian then.” And she had become a new convert and she’d kind of locked into this kind of a level of, you know, pure, very narrow, restrictive fundamentalism and her belonging to this group was so critical that she was unable to have anything outside of the box of what they were kind of teaching her. Where, if she had had a conversion experience at ten or eleven or twelve and sort of had some maturity in the faith, it’d have been all together, you know, different. So now I see Furman students now being more sophisticated but not necessarily more mature.

Dr. Tollison: More sophisticated as a result of their socio things but not necessarily more...

Mr. Pitts: Influence and all like that, that’s right.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Pitts: But their life experience is that... Oh, I mentioned about the young man who was down in Atlanta with his girlfriend – who, by the way, dated him for four years and when they were graduating he was thinking they’d be getting married and she said “Oh no. That wasn’t really possible.” She’d have to marry someone else because he really wasn’t in their class, you know. They had dated for four years and he was, one of the funny times, he was down visiting her family and they took him out to eat at the country club. And he was so excited. It was the summer of his junior to senior year and we worked out a situation for him to live overseas in Israel on an archaeological project. And the young woman’s father said “Well, why would you wanna do that? And go over there and play in that sandbox with those sand niggers all summer?” was his way of... And this guy thought “Well, gee, I’m mixed up in this archaeological project, I’m a religion major and going to Israel. Isn’t this kind of wonderful.” And in that family’s value system what he was doing was very, you know, it didn’t make any kind of sense at all, you know. And so I think that is a struggle that – I remember one girl who was from a very poor family, beautiful, beautiful young woman from Florida. And everyone thought, and she presented herself as really a very well-groomed affluent young woman but, as I got to know her, she was from significant poverty. Her family had split apart and her mother, when she went home, she would live with her mother in a travel trailer at the beach. But yet she presented herself. And yet... But she was not free enough to kind of say “Hey, this is who I am.”

Dr. Tollison: Let’s talk about, going to use a catch phrase, changing your religious identity.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah.

Dr. Tollison: When you were first... Way back to when you were...

Mr. Pitts: Sure, sure, going way back. All right. Furman was a school that was related to the South Carolina Baptist Convention. The South Carolina Baptist Convention elected our trustees. There was always a stormy conflictual relationship of any

institution to its parent body. Look at the state schools and their relationship to the legislature. So, there's always that sort of, kind of, tension. In the early 1970s L.D. Johnson and I came to the conclusion that this relationship had to change. This was eighteen to twenty years before the change.

Dr. Tollison: What sparked that?

Mr. Pitts: Well, we saw both the aspirations of Furman and also the changing nature of South Carolina Baptists, especially the Southern Baptist Convention and its being taken over by a more fundamentalist element.

Dr. Tollison: So this is happening simultaneously, Gordon Blackwell comes in...

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, but really the issue more, I think, had to do with the changing nature of South Carolina Baptists than even Furman.

Dr. Tollison: You mentioned that you were thinking about Furman's goals for the future and...

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, that's right. But as Furman was emerging as a first-rate liberal arts, you know, college, but yet there was a greater change occurring within the Southern Baptist life. Now, I guess I need to probably give to you for your records part of a book that I along with other people wrote – I have even a chapter on this about you and Furman too. But I'm very much of a Baptist but I'm not a fundamentalist and you don't have to be a fundamentalist to be a Baptist. It's altogether different. Now I'll get you copies of those things so you will have them for the file because I have one on Furman as a Baptist school. But the convention itself was changing and we were experiencing a corporate takeover by a fundamentalist segment. We could see this in the early 70s. It was really over by about 1978. The takeover was really... We could go back and do the autopsy. It was very much there.

Dr. Tollison: Closely connected with the Inerrancy Movement?

Mr. Pitts: Inerrancy Movement is one of the things but it had to do with control. It had to do also with the role of women. Probably there was more... Baptists had more to say... Helen Lee Turner could tell you about this – who studied fundamentalism as extent. Fundamentalism has more concern about the role of women than about the Bible and so the changing role of women. And it was a takeover, a corporate takeover. And so we saw there was a need for Furman to develop a different relationship with South Carolina Baptists. Basically Furman was involved in what I called a denial process. That "Oh well to know us is to love us," said one administrator who is still here. Another said "Well, you know, we believe in the pendulum. And the pendulum is going to swing back and things will be fine once again." And we were beginning to say, L.D. and I, that "No, the clock is broken. And there's some things happening within the ethos and culture of, kind of, Baptists and it's not going to swing back. And we need to

do what we could do to, really, not to change Furman but to preserve Furman to be the kind of institution that it is.”

Dr. Tollison: Umm hmm.

Mr. Pitts: Well, this thing kind of rocked along. And the metaphor that I like to use, because of my involvement in addiction treatment: it was like I was dealing with a spouse who was living with a drunk. And Furman was behaving in the denial spouse thing – “What problem? There is no problem.” And basically you got to the point where “The only reason why we have a problem is, Jim, because of you and what you’re doing and saying, you know. You keep upsetting these folks.” Well things rocked along and we came to... I guess, the critical point came as a result of a program that I hosted called the Furman University Pastors School. I was getting ready to do the travel study program to the Middle East and Africa and put the program together before I left. And when I got home I came home to a firestorm because of a particular person and his wife that I had asked on the program, Mahan and Janice Siler, who had been here ten years earlier and who had done a program on marriage and family for the Pastors School – great folks. And these folks were at the Pullen Church in Raleigh at that time. Well, unknown to me – and it wouldn’t have made a difference anyway – Mahan had written a letter castigating Southern Baptists about their un-Christ-like and uncharitable attitude towards homosexuals. And, after all, many of these are our sons and daughters and how can we relate in a compassionate way with folks who are dealing with this issue. Because I had invited him to be a part of the program it was understood that I was promoting homosexuality. And the administration was furious with me for not doing my homework and that Mahan had written this letter, though I didn’t know about it.

Dr. Tollison: In what year?

Mr. Pitts: Probably ’88, ’87-’88. So this created a firestorm and we had to have, finally, a called meeting of the trustees to deal with this Pastors School Program. And what was funny is the administration started doing a dance and that this really wasn’t a Furman program, this was simply a summer camp. Well, it was being done by the chaplains’ office, by the chaplain and also it was paid for with Furman money so I was unwilling to say, to disassociate. I mean I’m employed by Furman and the contract was signed by Furman and this was a Furman program. Secondly, in that I should probably cancel the speaker, cancel the School, and one administrator said what Furman really needed instead of this sort of continuing education program that, by that time, had been going on for almost 100 years, is that we needed to have a Furman Golf Tournament for pastors. And I said “That’s fine.” I said “I don’t play golf. I don’t know anything about golf.” I said “I lie and cheat in different ways, but if you want to have a golf tournament, find somebody to run a golf tournament. What I know how to run is a continuing education experience.” Well, the situation continued to kind of cook and I was unwilling to kind of back down about the program. And it was siding into the issue, which the administration did not want to go, of academic freedom, you know. But I never tossed that into the pool or anything like that.

And during this period of time Furman became quite anxious. The president was John Johns. (laughs) I was laughing, I was doing a speech recently and my life has been lived between Wally Mullinax's Chicken Shack Program on WESC and John Johns' woodshed. So John would have me up to his office almost on a daily basis. See I didn't have tenure. I was on kind of an administration appointment so I was here at the pleasure of the president. And I thought, well, I'm gonna pack my books until five o'clock. So this waxed along quite strong. The chairman of the trustees was Tom Hartness and Tom was quite anxious about this whole thing and the firestorm that I had created. And so he and Dr. Johns would go out to various textile mill-hill churches to try to make peace with these preachers and all like that. But there really was no way to kind of appease this and they were looking for an issue. And this became kind of the red herring issue of Furman promoting homosexuality which was not at all even true. But we had this trustee meeting and it was decided at that time to go ahead and to let me continue with the Pastors School. And the future of the Pastors School, we would just wait and see what happened. And also, I was asked by the president not to say anything for about, for the coming six months or so, just kind of keep your mouth shut, because I'd done a couple newspaper interviews and referred to this sort of like, you know, it was kind of like the Vietnam war, the war's come home, you know. What we were facing in other areas has now come to South Carolina and this is the Fort Sumter in terms of the South Carolina, you know, Baptists' match. Unknown to the administration is that this was a firestorm that could not be put out. I also was in conversation with some students who wanted to host "The Last Temptation of Christ" movie.

Dr. Tollison: I heard about this.

Mr. Pitts: So anyway, I carefully worked that to where we worked that through an academic department and academic club and had the blessings of the assistant, associate, academic dean – I guess it was the associate academic dean – who later, when it hit the fan, lied and said he knew nothing about it. But I had sat with him and brought the students to him to kind of deal with that. And then, as this continued to go, the administration, in their own wisdom, decided to invite my friend, Pat Conroy, to do the commencement program. And this was not on my recommendation or anything and, to make a long story short, they went through all Pat Conroy's writings, found various passages, put these into a major packet of material that was shipped to every South Carolina Baptist, you know, and all like that. So the situation kind of, you know, ramped up and we finally... The situation was coming home to the administration. And, by the way, Dr. Johns and I are extremely close personal friends and I would see him... Like these days I see him at least every other week and we go out and eat and all like that and we're dear, dear friends. But, at that time, you know, I was like Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the hands of an Angry God" over the pits of fire. John, I finally knew that we had kind of turned a corner when he said, you know, he said "Jim, these fundamentalists are telling us the truth." I said "How's that?" He said "We're not [inaudible]?" And I affirmed that they were. And then there was a series of things where some young attorneys who encouraged – and I learned this just three weeks ago – one of the attorneys was encouraged and

counseled by his Baptist minister father about here is a way out of the wilderness. And so these young attorneys came and told the Furman president that we're gonna have a parade and we'd like for you to lead it.

Dr. Tollison: Would that person be a good person to talk with?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. Among the people would be Neil Rabon. Neil Rabon would be one of the people. And there's another person I can... Steve... I need to come up with Steve's last name, president of the Quaternion Club here. But anyway, they had this meeting and the, trying to get us a way out of the wilderness. And we made that, finally, it took about three years for the denial systems in Furman to break down. But there never was any of the... The fundamentalists were always straight up and honest with us; they were out to get us. And they were doing a wonderful job of packing the trustees. And we came to, almost, where they had the control of the trustees. Dr. Johns says if we'd waited a year we wouldn't even, now be a second rate Bob Jones. The governance came that close. Now, here's what I would like to go on record in saying: is that the fight in terms of our governance was the good fight. That was the easy fight. The arena that we have now gone into is the much harder fight in the fight that Furman may not win. And that is the fight in terms of the economy of the institution when it comes to its governance, when it comes to the principalities and powers of corporate concerns, and all like that. And I think, I have much more concern about that fight. Now the other fight, we had the fight and we won it. But now this other fight is to me, this next chapter, is the much more difficult chapter and I'm less hopeful about how we're going to win that, or maintain our identity. And this hooks back into, see... I'll quote David Shi – this might even go back a bit further – John Plyler built the campus other than when David got here and just wanted to finish the campus. Gordon Blackwell along with Frank Bonner really built the quality of the academic program. We could say, kind of like Moses, John Johns set us free, you know. Now the question is “How are going to preserve and maintain the institution that we dearly love? Or is it going to morph by various economic and other pressures into something that it was not.” Now David Shi says that Furman was set free but it was not set adrift. Plyler, Blackwell, Johns all were churchmen, Dr. Shi is not a churchman. And so they had a different understanding of the ethos of the institution and the church. And also there was really a greater attention, I'd say, to memory, history, community than – I think we talk a lot about it now – but maybe have really less community than we had at one time previously. I think we talk more about it, but... And see, as a chaplain, one of my responsibilities and roles was to offer pastoral care to the entire Furman community of students, faculty, staff, administration and alumni. And so there was more of a – in the days before outsourcing – we were all in this kind of together. And coming down I was thinking about... I'm getting ready to go to a reception for one of the facilities staff people. And I always would laugh. I said “You know, it's much easier to get a PhD than it is a plumber.” (laughs) I said “We've gotta really pay attention to these folks, these are golden, you know, because what holds Furman together is the plumbing.” You can get PhDs, you know, lined up but a plumber is hard, hard to find. But I would say that the battle that Furman faces now in terms of

maintaining its identity and its religious identity is very critical. My critics would say “Jim, it’s not possible without a formal tie to a denominational entity.” And I kept saying “No, you’re wrong.”

Dr. Tollison: The maintenance of a sense of community.

Mr. Pitts: And the maintenance of a religious identity.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. And I think now, my critics that I argued with may be right. That it’s maybe impossible without some formal ties to maintain that religious identity. Now, see, I’m speaking as a Baptist, I’m speaking as a person who believes in soul freedom, who believes in religious liberty, who believes in separation of church and state, the priesthood of believers, and the right that a person has to believe or not to believe, all of that’s part of this classical Baptist ethos. And I speak as a Christian who is very much committed to ecumenical endeavors. And, as an aside, some of my closest personal friends are members of the Poor Clares monastic community just right off the Furman campus here. Have you seen their community on 291?

Dr. Tollison: I’ve heard about it. I haven’t seen it.

Mr. Pitts: Yeah, my dearest, dearest friends, you know. And so the person who is very ecumenical. But, I think, Furman at the present time is more committed to being so accommodating in terms of an inter-faith kind of stance that we probably are denying our own tradition and our own identity. Now, I’m a Christian and I have friends that are Jewish – matter of fact, every year I’m so embarrassed – I get Easter cards from Muslim friends from the Middle East, you know. And I never send them Easter cards. (laughs) But they know I’m a Christian believer and I know they’re a faithful Muslim, you know. But I think “Who is Furman in terms of its identity?” Now, in 2025, 2026, is that gonna be Furman’s 200th anniversary?

Dr. Tollison: 200th in 2026.

Mr. Pitts: Okay. Out in front of the library here is a time capsule. In the time capsule I have placed a document with a medallion of the Furman seal. And it is my hope and prayer, as I say, on Furman’s 200th anniversary when they dig this up that Furman will have the same institutional seal and the same commitment which translates for Christ and learning. And that’s my hope, that’s my prayer.

Dr. Tollison: But you’re concerned about...

Mr. Pitts: I am concerned that can we maintain that sort of claim to our identity but it is identity that is open and it’s ecumenical. That it is inviting, it’s hospitable to people of faith and people of no faith.

Dr. Tollison: Can you talk specifically about instances in the past ten-fifteen years that have – or since the split, I guess – that have culminated in how you now feel, or have been warning signs to you?

Mr. Pitts: Well, I thought that this would be the next chapter and this has become more fully the next chapter, you know. And I would like for our identity to be shaped by our history by a realistic embrace of the present as well as our aspirations for the future. But I think in our day and time we really with the computer just want to hit the “delete” key and move on and don’t realize that how our context is shaped by our past and how it then sets in motion our options for the future. i.e. why would we be in the crisis that we’re in now in Iraq and the Middle East if we had just paid attention to the past, if we’d read the Sykes-Picot Agreement, if we had read the history of British occupation in Iraq in 1920, here we go again. What can we learn from the past, how does it shape and nurture us? And, see. I see Furman, to use a metaphor, like a tree. But it has roots – it is not a cut flower in a vase that’s soon going to wilt – but those roots nurture us and that continue to emerge and grow us. My wish for Furman is purity of heart and by that I wish that Furman will be committed to being a first rate liberal arts college with a Baptist or Christian tradition or heritage. So I hope Furman continues to be a university in name only and I would like Furman’s primary commitment to be to undergraduate liberal arts education. And if I as a person in publishing come up and says “Furman needs to start a publishing company. Or Furman needs to start a seminary. Or Furman needs to do this or that,” I would hope the president would not only open the door or maybe open a window and throw me out the window and say “No, Jim, Furman is going to maintain itself as a first rate undergraduate liberal arts college that has this particular religious heritage and tradition.” And that this is who we are and this is where we are and that this is good to be this.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think the religious identity of the president has had the greatest impact on how Furman has changed?

Mr. Pitts: Oh yes. I think it would be... The most critical thing about any institution is orientation. We pay a lot of attention to the orientation of students. We do little about the orientation of administrators; a little bit more about, maybe, about trustees; but also the hiring practices and who is hired to come and work and live and teach here is also critical in our identity. So I’m not looking at necessarily verbiage on paper, character and value statements and all like that, but how is this fleshed out in the lives of the people who are committed to being a part of this

Dr. Tollison: Yeah [inaudible]

Mr. Pitts: That’s right. So I’d say people are really important and who we hire, who we solicit to be administrators and staff and faculty and students is very critical in forming who we are. And as a chaplain and, I guess, even a human being I think relationships really, really matter. And so I think the most important thing that

Furman has to offer folks is to invite people into a community where people are prized and invited and affirmed and respected. And where there is a healthy relationship within our interpersonal relationships. Also encouraging and helping in our personal relationship with our self, you know, as well as having a healthy relationship with God. And so I think relationships really, really matter. Now this means that I'm not too impressed by slogans or slick pamphlets or whiz bang PR kind of programs. And, by the way, I know how to do that, see, 'cause, one of my other occupations is that I have done some consulting work with circuses. I know how to bring the circus to town. But what really matters is not all this blitz of hyperbole but who are we as a community and as a people. And if I had any other prayer for Furman I would like for us to stop singing "How Great We Art." I think we're a good place. I think we're a wonderful place and I'm just honored that almost 50 years of my life was here. But if we're as good as I know us to be, let's stop acting like we don't believe it by always telling people "Hey, I want you to know I'm really wonderful," you know, "I'm really the greatest that is," you know. If somebody tells you that you wonder, you know, "Come on, what is there about this person?" So I'd like Furman to kind of chill a little bit in terms of singing "How Great We Art" and simply say how do we go about doing it and stop just saying it. And I think we are, we are that. But there are ways that we diminish that by always, you know, getting caught up in, you know. After all we were part of the Nifty 50 and now we're part of the Fabulous 40 of these, you know, select colleges. Well, what does that mean in terms of these kinds of, kind of, you know, rankings.

Dr. Tollison: So, if I understand you correctly, you think there's a little bit too much fluff and stuff.

Mr. Pitts: Well, no, I think that we are too... That marketing is becoming the primary driving tool, you know, and I'm not... And, by the way, people that know Jim Pitts know that Jim Pitts [inaudible] and knows how to promote and invite and all like that. But I don't want us to be just so driven by just image enhancement. But just to kind of... Who we are is okay. We've been about this now 170, what, seven years, you know? And it's a good place. And I think Greenville is a wonderful place to live and be. Matter of fact, I had a job offer a few months back to move to Jerusalem, you know. And, of course, my son said "Dad, I knew that when you retired you'd be sort of depressed. I didn't know you'd be self-destructive." (laughs) But, I mean, I would rather live in Greenville than any other place. It is a great place to live and be. Now, it's not as exciting as Jerusalem. It's not nearly as dynamic and dazzling as Washington, D.C., where I grew up, but I like it. And this is a good place to be and these are good people and this is a community that, I think, is just a great place to have roots and to grow and to raise one's family. And I'm very grateful that my two sons continue to live and work here and my grandchildren are here. If they were to move somewhere else (laughs) I'd have to consider that.

Dr. Tollison: Why did you retire?

Mr. Pitts: Oh, okay, that's a good question. There were other things that I wanted to do.

Secondly, I have been at this – see, I turned – when I retired I turned 66 and I just thought it was time for a new chapter for me. And it was also agreed that my two colleagues, Vic Greene and Shirley Smith, decided to retire at the same time. So we all graduated from Furman together. I have a number of other projects I’m involved in in terms of the publishing company and like that. And I wanted to see if there was life after Furman. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Is there? (laughs)

Mr. Pitts: There really is, there really is, and it is a good life. I’ve quipped that I just kind of wished my folks could have seen me finish college. I told David Shi a year before I retired that I was gonna retire so I gave him a year or so notice. And then, also, with the retirement of A.V. Huff – A.V. and I were very, very close friends – I thought that was another kind of a good signal this would be a good person to, kind of, hold hands and to graduate with. And then I was pretty close to the associate dean, Jeff Rogers, and so when Jeff went to First Baptist to do his mission work there.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think with the exit of so many of you all who had been here for so long is going to contribute to that change?

Mr. Pitts: Yeah. However, though, I don’t think – and I’m very impressed with your interest in both spending this time with me and your interest in talking about this project – I’m not sure that memory matters in terms of contemporary culture.

Dr. Tollison: Okay, that’s interesting.

Mr. Pitts: I don’t believe, I think, that memory is not really, you know, kind of valued. I think that’s across the board.

Dr. Tollison: But yet you think that...

Mr. Pitts: I think it does matter.

Dr. Tollison: History does provide, inevitably provides context.

Mr. Pitts: Oh no. I’m saying I think memory matters but I think within our culture...

Dr. Tollison: Oh, it’s not valued.

Mr. Pitts: Within our culture memory is not really kind of, you know, valued. And, by the way, I’m not saying the good old days were that hot, but the good old days helped shape who we are and helped provide us orientation and parameters as we embrace the present and kind of engage in the future. So I’m not one to go back into a nostalgia that never was.

Dr. Tollison: So, if I understand, do you think, at certain points in Furman's past she's been too restricted – told exactly “don't stray off of this path” – and do you think now we're wandering?

Mr. Pitts: Oh no. For instance, the Baptists served Furman well. For instance, I would say there was a greater economic breadth in the trustees under the Baptists than there is now. Secondly, the Baptists served Furman well occasionally when Furman did not want to do something. We would say “I'm sorry we can't do that. The Baptist's wouldn't let us do that.” They served the administration well. It's like a parent saying “Well, you know, I would let you do that but your mother would never agree to that.” So there was sort of a way that the Baptists were also used by Furman that way. So now we have become adult and now we have to ask that question “Well, who are you and what do you want to do?” And I think Furman is really trying to clarify its identity. And in corporate America life identities are often determined by the CEO. I have friends that are working for a major power company in another state and this CEO has come in and he was having a meeting with them. He's never been in the power industry but he told these other executives and engineer types that he wasn't gonna need any of them, he knew more about this than they did, and he was just as bright and smart, and he was gonna kind of lead them to the kind of promised land. And one of my friends says “Eighteen years to go in this corporate climate,” and he was just wondering if he could make it, you know, at all. And so this sort of arrogance that we sometimes find with people that come into a setting that they... See, I kind of believe – this is a Baptist thought – I believe that all of us are smarter than any one of us. And I may even be the preacher, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I have the last word, or the only word, and I might be wrong. Now also I believe that you can have a majority vote and the majority can also vote wrong. But I kind of believe that all of us are smarter than any one of us and I've always enjoyed working in a collegial relationships with people who, regardless of their title, were, you know, inviting and could, together we could try to resolve some things. Obviously certain people have certain things on their agenda that, where the buck stops, they have to make the decision.

Dr. Tollison: Do you think that Furman is still operating as a team?

Mr. Pitts: Um, don't know, don't know. I'd say that collegiality is enhanced in face-to-face relationships. And in our day we have so much reliance on technology that it's sometimes hard to kind of get a read on folks and we do a lot of flaming with emails. And I remember, for instance, somebody made some reference in something and they said “Well, it's nothing but a damn circus.” And so I wrote them back and I said “Well, I'm kind of offended by your remark.” I said “I'm a member of the Circus Fans of America, a long-term member of the Circus Historical Society. I'm a circus model builder and working on the history of the Sparks Circus and I take offense at what you've said.” Well, all that was tongue-in-cheek, you know, and they write back this long apology. Where, if we could kind of just sit together, they would realize I was kind of playing with them. And basically I would have criticized the use of the word “circus” because no, this wasn't a damn circus. A circus has a much better history, has more sense of

tradition, and is better organized. (laughs) This is not even a carnival, it's chaos. (laughs) But, see, there's certain things that come across in a relational thing, you know, where there is that sort of... Well, here's where, I guess, I grew up, some of my growing up was on a psychiatric unit and I spent a lot of time around psychotics and addiction. I worked for about 15 years for the Greenville Hospital System on their addiction treatment program. I was in the back ward of this psycho ward and this guy who – well, my wife who's, her career has been as a psychiatric nurse, Nancy would say "He's not a well person," which means he was crazy as hell – and he goes and puts his arm around me and says "You know, chaplain, a stop clock is right twice a day." And I thought "You know, that's right." And so somebody can really be quote "out of it" but they're worthy of my attention and respect, and I need to kind of listen to them because they may have something that I need to hear. And I think in our day we have so much coming at us and we're just engulfed with all this information that we really don't take the time to sort of listen. And there could be somebody who might not necessarily be in that echelon of decision making who has some insight and understanding that we need to pay attention to. Here's a quick story, I'll close with this: When I was being named chaplain, I knew the decision was to be made but I was not aware of when and where it was gonna be announced. I was down in the Pala-Den area of the student center and a gentleman there who's a dear lifelong friend was Junius Gladney. And Junius, when he saw me that day, he was all smiles and said "Well, you know, it was good to see you Jim," and I got whatever I was getting from Junius. I said "Junius you seem mighty happy." He said "Yeah, I heard some good news." I said "Really." I said "Good news about what?" He said "Well it's good news about you." And I said "Well I'm glad to hear there's good news." So I just let it slide and went back upstairs to my office and I got to wondering "What's he talking about?" And so I went back down and said "Junius," I said, "I think I'll follow up." I said "What have you heard?" He said "Well," he said, "you can't tell anybody I told you but I heard you're gonna be named the chaplain." And I said "Well I'm really pleased to hear that. Glad to get the word." And I, anyway, I later, and I learned in the decision about me being chaplain, it wasn't made in a rarified committee, but the president just kind of spent some time and walking around campus and talking to people and asking for their advice. And one of the people's whose advice he sought was the guy who was flipping hamburgers there in the Pala-Den. He said "What do you think about this?" Dr. Johns had that sort of collegiality, you know. He didn't have a computer in his office. There was no computer even tied into the main frame in his office suite. But if you wanted to come see him you could walk in. (laughs) Or call and say "I need to talk to you about something," you know. So there was a management style, a leadership style that was very, very relational. And I think that is very, very difficult to maintain in the clutter of technology in today's world. And here's another quick story here in the library: I was talking with this young woman who was working in the lab in the front of the library – what is it, the learning lab, I think they called it? – and talking with her about communication with email and how it's not really effective and all like that, you know. Somehow we migrated to her boyfriend, or something and I said "Well where is he?" "Well he lives in California." And I said "Really," I said, "How often do you see each other?" Well

she said “We really don’t see each other.” I said “What do you mean?” And this significant person in her life had only been an email relationship for four years, but she never saw the person. He had never seen her and she didn’t even like to talk to him on the phone. She liked the control of email, you know, better.

Dr. Tollison: Interesting.

Mr. Pitts: And I realized what a different kind of paradigm about relationships and how we’re kind of seduced in certain ways to think that this is how you communicate, you know. And that they saw this as...

Dr. Tollison: I know you want to wrap it up.

Mr. Pitts: Good. I’ve talked too long

Dr. Tollison: No, you haven’t. This was wonderful and this is a very abrupt question. You mentioned on the phone that you run into some people who are envious of your retirement because [inaudible]

Mr. Pitts: Oh I just saw some guy here when I was going to look for the tripod. He said “Well, tell us what it’s like outside the gates.” These were people who were part of the janitorial staff here and all like that.

Dr. Tollison: Is that a reflection of “retirement is nice” or is it a reflection of “we want to get away”?

Mr. Pitts: I think that at the present time there’s a lot of people who are looking forward to graduating.

Dr. Tollison: Why would you say that? Just be candid, ‘cause we can...

Mr. Pitts: I think, basically, maybe is they don’t feel valued.

Dr. Tollison: And that’s related to that personable quality that you feel...

Mr. Pitts: It has to do with the people that are the direct people relating to them and relating to them, you know. And for instance, one of my roles – and it had almost become a joke – I would thank people for coming to work. I mean [inaudible] “Thank you for coming to work today.” ‘Cause I realized that maybe for them to come to work was one hard task and they had a lot of other things to do and no one had even expressed to them that, you know, “We’re really glad that you’re here and that, in light of all that you’re having to say grace over, that you came here and we really care about you.” Maybe... Have you heard of a guy named Tom Cloer?

Dr. Tollison: Mmm hmm.

Mr. Pitts: If you talk to Tom...

Dr. Tollison: Tom just retired this year.

Mr. Pitts: That's right. If I had to name the most important faculty member at Furman it would be Tom Cloer. I would tell my advisees that if you graduate from Furman without knowing Tom Cloer you have missed Furman. Now I have colleagues that will offer classes at ten o'clock in the morning and if you ask me about taking those classes I'd say "Let's see if we can find some other choice." However, if you learn that Tom Cloer's offering a class at 2 a.m. and you get into it, get up and take it. And Tom is a proponent, not only academically but also professionally – he's done writing on this – is what we call "invitational education." And I would love to see the philosophy exhibited and encouraged by Tom to be a part of the ethos of Furman. And also I helped supervise a doctoral study where we took this same philosophy and we transformed it into "how do you create an inviting church" in terms of being invitational. And the church that I'm a member of serves me well. I can go out and do seminars on this and use my congregation as how to be a disinviting church. That various things that we do, either intentionally or unintentionally, that involve, include or disinvite and reject people. But if nothing else, I would say that you would find Tom to be a delightful human being. He is the finest human being that I have met at Furman. He is really fabulous. And Tom's philosophy kind of illustrates where I'm kind of coming from there. And there are other people within Furman that carry this out. And also at Furman we had a network of folks that we would kind of work with to sort of, among other things... I remember one fellow, oh golly, he was going down the tubes something terrible, you know. And we all kind of decided, and one of the persons working with me with him said that "Jim, you only have so many grace points. You want to spend it on this kid or someone else?" I said "Let's spend it here." And together we would partner in what I called creating new resurrection stories of people that we were really pulling out of the academic depth and to where they could not only survive and thrive but also graduate. And Tom has been more instrumental in the success of Furman students than anybody else I know. He just, he is marvelous. A couple years ago, [inaudible], the state of South Carolina started a Professor of the Year program and the first year of the selection of that person it was Tom Cloer out of all the people in South Carolina.

Dr. Tollison: Wow. I'll definitely have to contact him.

Mr. Pitts: He's a great guy.

Dr. Tollison: Thank you so much.

Mr. Pitts: Well, thank you. This was fun.

Dr. Tollison: Do you have anything that you think would be important to, for future researchers to know about?

Mr. Pitts: Well I think basically, I think what I have said kind of summarizes the kind of approach that we brought to chaplaincy here is we were not religious activities directors, we were not program persons. But we were in the business of valuing and enhancing relationships and trying to encourage people to have good relationships. And probably the most important thing that I did with a number of students is just introducing them to other people, introducing them to, you know... Helping them create these interpersonal kind of networks – now we call it kind of “networking” and that kind of crap – but this is just somebody who’d be fun to know and it’s like me taking someone by the hand and saying “I want you to meet Tom Cloer,” you know. I said “You just need to know this guy.” And then also to help them have a better kind of relationship with themselves. And also helping them have a healthier relationship with God. And so these programmatic things and these activity things I always saw as secondary to this, what you and I would call, kind of a pastoral care ministry of relationships. But I was not alone in that. There was a network of, as I mentioned, of the various people that shared that with me, so it was not a “lone ranger” activity. I was just a part of a process of and a supportive network of various folks. And some of these people, not only did I work with, but some of these people that I related to have become, literally, lifelong friends. I mentioned about my involvement in various things in terms of publishing. But that didn’t come about because I was wonderful and a skilled writer and that great a businessman. It just came about because of one of the relationships is with a young man that I met at a local radio station when he was a junior in high school and we developed a friendship and he, in a sense – there’s a statement “If you want to be a success you put yourself in the way of successful people and get drug along with them.” And we have done various kinds of, you know, projects and entrepreneurial things. And today he is a congressional candidate. I’m waiting and see what happens tonight. He’s in another state. But my ties and friendships go back to meeting a junior in high school who was working in a local radio station and we just developed this kind of supportive friendship, not that I was choosing him because it was just that we just kind of hit it off and kind of liked each other. But it’s good to meet you.

Dr. Tollison: It’s wonderful to meet you!

Mr. Pitts: And thank you for the privilege.

Dr. Tollison: I’ve enjoyed talking to you.

Mr. Pitts: I hope I haven’t rattled too much.

Dr. Tollison: No.