

## Joe Roberts

Interviewee: Joe Roberts

Interviewer: Courtney L. Tollison, Ph.D.

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### Transcript

Dr. Tollison: Today is September 21, and I'm talking with Joe Roberts, former assistant to President Gordon Blackwell and President John E. Johns, and today we're going to go over a few topics: Phi Beta Kappa, we'll talk a little bit about Frank Bonner, any information you could provide about the Daniel Bequest that would be relevant as well, and then the big thing that we need to tackle today is the severance with the Baptist Convention. We've got a lot to talk about. Would you mind if we went ahead and perhaps talked about some of these little things and then we can get into the big story here?

Mr. Roberts: We can do that.

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about Phi Beta Kappa. This was of course a huge event in Furman's history. Something that she's very proud of, in 1973, the granting of the chapter. Can you talk about that from your perspective as assistant to the President?

Mr. Roberts: I can talk about it in a limited way, in that context, and even before that when I served as a young trustee at Furman. The dream of Phi Beta Kappa at Furman was certainly related to Gordon Blackwell's vision of this being a university that would have some nationally recognized excellence. But in a more continuing primary sense, even before the great vision of Gordon Blackwell, the Phi Beta Kappa concept at Furman was the dream of Frank Bonner. From the time Frank Bonner became the dean at Furman it was his deliberate intent to move as rapidly as possible under the reality of circumstances to upgrade Furman from an academic point of view. In his mind this focused largely on faculty selection. And so as a dean, Dr. Bonner played a very much involved front-and-center role in faculty selection. It was a process delegated only in the most limited way to department heads. Dr. Bonner was very much in control of who became a member of the Furman faculty. His idea was to have people of academic excellence with an appropriate background in their schooling process, but also with his makeup, at times maybe in the minds of some somewhat puritanical, people that were characterized with integrity, people who had good character, people who had high moral standards. And through the years, often even with limited resources in those early years, Dr. Bonner did a remarkable job, just a remarkable job, in bringing to the Furman community some professors that were quite good.

Dr. Tollison: I understand that that can get sort of sensitive at times between departments, department heads specifically and the dean. Do you recall any types of resentment on the part of department chairs?

Mr. Roberts: I think this kind of thing I would need to put in broad context. Professors in an academic institution, I would say professors in almost any academic institution of quality, not always but often, have a built-in type bias against the administrative process. It's built-in.

Dr. Tollison: Yes, it's inherent in the culture.

Mr. Roberts: It's as if they, at times, conceive of the administration as the enemy. In this regard you are often dealing with what I call the "James and John" syndrome. People want authority. People want control. And department heads, I think naturally so, prefer to control their departments in an academic institution. Dr. Bonner believed in academic freedom as intently as any human being I have ever known. However, with respect to department control, the control that was given to department heads, I think you could fairly say was sort of on a lease, and Dr. Bonner controlled the lease. Ultimately he was in charge front-and-center of the academic process. Dr. Bonner by nature was forthright and no-nonsense in what he did. For example, when I came to Furman with my background having been in the pastory, when I wrote a memo, often I would have a three-page or a four-page memo. This is because I sought to put what I was trying to say in a broad type context. When Dr. Bonner wrote a memo, he didn't give a hoot about the broad context, and he would give often a directive in two or three sentences and there's a sense in which sensitivity, fully explaining the reason why this memo was being sent, was not always a matter of concern with Dr. Bonner. He was basically interested in the bottom line.

Dr. Tollison: Get to the point.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. He moved to the point, the final point, immediately. In doing this, I observed a long, long series of incidences and relationships, and in every instance Dr. Bonner was above board, never devious, always honest, always characterized with integrity, always having the academic excellence of Furman University at his mind. Admittedly in doing this he was not always the diplomat. Sometimes he was something like a drill sergeant, sometimes something like a general, but authority had been given to him by the President to look after the academic program of Furman University. I would say under Dr. Plyler that delegation was a thorough going. Dr. Plyler had other things to do, to look after, in bringing to reality the dream of this new campus, and Dr. Bonner looked after the academic program. In many ways, not as much so, but that delegation continued with the presence of Gordon Blackwell and with the presence of John Johns.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. So, would you characterize it as a responsibility for the day-to-day actions of the university and in some ways its long-term goals as well? While, what, in terms of the relationship between the president and Dr. Bonner?

Mr. Roberts: I think there was always a good relationship between Dr. Bonner and the presidents. I indicated with Dr. Plyler the delegation of the academic program to

me seems to have been thorough going. It was altogether pretty much in the hands of Frank Bonner. I think with the coming of Gordon Blackwell, someone who was very much interested even in a detailed way with every aspect of the academic program of Furman University, the delegation of the academic program to the dean and provost was somewhat more limited in that the president became more involved in the process and the decision making along the way. I think with both Dr. Blackwell and Dr. Johns there was a compliment many people were not aware of that Furman University benefited from greatly. This had to do with some of the presentations that were made to major corporations for funding and some of the major foundations for funding. They seem to have had an approach where with Dr. Blackwell he would give his well-prepared stately words of introduction that were quite impressive, and then would more or less turn the presentation over to Dr. Bonner to give the academic aspect that was going to be enhanced with this potential gift. With the coming of Dr. Johns the same kind of format was followed in an even more successful type way I think than under Dr. Blackwell. In this format, instead of giving the well prepared stately formal impressive words of introduction, Dr. Johns would do the personal, the folksy, sometimes the humorous type words of relating to the foundation board or the corporate board that they were talking to and create a good type of mood and feeling and then Dr. Bonner would pick up with the academic type program that was going to be affirmed or entered into with this particular gift. And this kind of format of presentation worked very, very well.

Dr. Tollison: So if I understand correctly, I'm trying to get a sense of if the relationship is more of a 'this is your domain, take care of your domain, keep me updated, if there are any problems let me know.' It seems it was more that way under President Plyler and then perhaps with Gordon Blackwell and Dr. Johns it was more of a, in terms of from Dr. Bonner's perspective, 'I'm taking a lead from you as well', as opposed to this strictly being my domain and I'll take care of it and then report to you. There was more of a working relationship in terms of an exchange there.

Mr. Roberts: That's true, and I think with Dr. Blackwell and with Dr. Johns there was more reporting on the part of the dean and updating the provost than there had been under Dr. Plyler. Dr. Blackwell and Dr. Johns, as I think this would be true of any good President, neither of them liked surprises. If there was a potential problem that conceivably could be a real problem, they did not want this put on their desk after the explosion.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Roberts: They wanted to know about this potential problem well ahead of time.

Dr. Tollison: Okay, so open communication.

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: And while Dr. Bonner was, as you mentioned, sort of issued directives to perhaps other people in the University, would you say that he also took directives from the president sometimes?

Mr. Roberts: He often took directives from presidents and some people, some faculty members, viewed him as the president's axe. You know if there was a problem that had to be addressed with respect to the academic program or the faculty that was going to raise eyebrows or have an inevitable type opposition or maybe some confrontation, this was handled by Frank Bonner. It was not handled by the president.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Roberts: And to me this was a great service that Frank Bonner did to the president of the university.

Dr. Tollison: So could you say that his role was similar to yours in the sense that you dealt with potential problems, diplomacy, to outside constituents, and perhaps Frank Bonner, maybe not the diplomacy, but certainly dealt with problems on campus?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, internally on campus with respect to the academic program and faculty.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Roberts: He was the person who handled the problems for the administration. And in the human predicament, human beings being what they are, this is not the kind of thing that makes you immensely popular.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Roberts: My background was such that I was familiar with churches. In the large church, that is the large church with a strong program and an aggressive program with outreach and education and discipleship, there is a role that the minister of education plays where he relates to the congregation and the committees with the problematic type programming rather than the pastor. And this shields and protects the minister of the church and the hit comes to the minister of education. You had the same kind of dynamic at Furman as I think you have in most educational institutions with the dean and provost and the president.

Dr. Tollison: Alright, let's go on. In terms of timing here, it is about 10:30 right now, and is it okay if we go to about 12:30 or so?

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: I want to definitely get this going. Could we mention really quickly the Daniel

Bequest.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. The Daniel Bequest has the background, as I recall it, it probably has other backgrounds, but the background of it as I recall it and as I was aware of it has to do with a longstanding friendly relationship between the Daniel family and Furman University. The Daniel Corporation built most all of the buildings on the Furman Campus. President Plyler, Gordon Blackwell, Lib Blackwell, John Johns, Martha Johns, were close friends and friendly and gracious to the Daniel family. In the original plan of Furman University there was a chapel that had never been built. One day Mrs. Daniel came by to see the president of Furman and said "I would like for the chapel not to be built until I die and my estate is settled and it will be provided for in the estate."

Dr. Tollison: Do you remember a date, time period?

Mr. Roberts: I do not remember a date and if I recall correctly this may have been at the very beginning of Gordon Blackwell's presidency. And the president agreed to that type request. When Dr. Johns became president at Furman and we engaged in a funding campaign that in our minds was significant, there was some element of pressure put on to go ahead and build the chapel. Dr. Johns felt that it was very important to honor the commitment that had earlier been made to Mrs. Daniel. And even though some limited funding would have been made available, Dr. Johns rejected that because he felt that a commitment had been made that needed to be honored. As our esteemed chaplain, L.D. Johnson, wanted more and more for the chapel to be erected during his lifetime after the beginning of his illness, he asked for permission from the president to talk to Mrs. Daniel about funding the chapel immediately. The president gave Dr. Johnson that kind of permission. He came back and reported that Mrs. Daniel looked him straight in the eye and said "You'll see this chapel if you live long enough after I die."

Dr. Tollison: Do you know why that was so important to her?

Mr. Roberts: I do not know all of her thinking in this regard. There was some concern, no amount of money had ever been mentioned to the president or to the chaplain about the money she was providing and to my knowledge the vice-president for business affairs or the president of Furman were not aware of the large amount that Furman would receive. It was, I believe, twenty-two and a quarter million dollars and by the time the stock was transferred about twenty-four and a quarter million dollars, if I recall correctly.

Dr. Tollison: This is Wayne Weaver you're talking about?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. And the gift of course was a magnanimous gift, a very gracious gift, on the part of Mrs. Daniel.

Dr. Tollison: The largest single gift that Furman had ever received?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, by far the largest gift that Furman had ever received. Prior to that the largest gift that Furman had ever received had come from the Daniel

Foundation, and the story on that was that we wanted to build the music building, which we desperately needed for many reasons. And the idea was to have not a major campaign but a quiet behind-the-scenes campaign, and to pick out twenty or twenty-five individuals or corporations or groups that conceivably could make a contribution, not relate to the public at large at all, but only relate to these twenty or twenty-five people, and to get the two-and-a-half to three million or whatever it was we needed to build the music building. I believe two-and-a-half or three million would have done it at the time. An appointment was made for the president of Furman, Dr. Blackwell, to speak to the Foundation Board of the Daniel Corporation for an initial request. And as I understand it the idea was for him to request a million dollars. In driving down, he thought 'why request a million. To build this building and to endow it, we endow our buildings that we build, we need four million,' and so he asked for four million. And so they gave him the four million dollars and by the time the stock was transferred it was four-and-a-quarter million dollars. And that was the largest gift at the time that Furman had ever received.

Dr. Tollison: Wow, interesting story. Thank you. Let's go into the severance with the Baptist Convention. Let's start off by talking about the historical background of the relationship between Furman and the South Carolina Baptist Convention. You're welcome to begin wherever you would like.

Mr. Roberts: It has been said by many people that Baptists have been prolific in founding colleges. The Southern Baptist Convention has never had a college, even though the original dream of Richard Furman was for Southern Baptists to have a major university in Washington, D.C. And a seed was planted that never ripened or came to fulfillment, and this is the background of Georgetown University. It came from that original seed planted by Richard Furman. But state conventions founded colleges. In founding the colleges, Baptists have been very generous, very generous financially to the colleges that they founded. If you compare this to the kind of thing other denominations normally do, giving to a college like Furman of another denomination they may get \$400,000 or maybe \$500,000. Furman was getting 1.6 million dollars. In addition to that there were other moneys. For example, Baptists with their concern about separation of church and state did not like federal funding of buildings of any capital need, brick and mortar type funding. Baptists were against that. And so when Furman got approval for a brick and mortar type grant for the science building, which was 60% of the science building, this enraged South Carolina Baptists and made them quite angry because of their concern for separation of church and state. And so they voted for Furman not to accept that, but in doing so they said "We'll give you the money." And so South Carolina Baptist paid for what is it, I think, 60% of our science building under that arrangement. The students at Furman would not be aware that the PAC building was basically paid for by South Carolina Baptist. An initial contribution was made by the Lay family and in later years, after Herman Lay's death, that

family gave very generously to a scholarship fund. But the PAC building was built on borrowed money and the loan was paid back from the capital needs money given by the South Carolina Baptist Convention. And so that is the way that building was funded. Something that many people at Furman are not aware of and I in my own mind had difficulty comprehended this, in the move of Furman to the new campus there was a featured article in the state Baptist paper and I believe another one in the Furman magazine that showed South Carolina Baptist made a commitment basically to fund one-third, one-third, of the money for the initial move, for the initial part, of the new campus. That in itself was something that was quite significant as far as a monetary contribution was concerned. In this regard, another thing that has been said that is of course true, is that through the years Baptists have been tough critics, tough critics, of the colleges that they founded and the colleges that they funded. There are reasons for this. One reason is that there is a difference in faith and reason, in faith and learning. A man by the name of Tertullian [Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus], in earlier church history, raised a question and engaged in a discussion about whether or not there was a relationship between Jerusalem and Athens, and he concluded that there was not a relationship between Jerusalem and Athens. Baptists believed that there was a relationship between Jerusalem and Athens, between church and denomination, between Christian faith and philosophy and reason and liberal learning. And they founded their colleges with the assumption that there was a relationship between Jerusalem and Athens. Baptists also had a problem of making a distinction between indoctrination and education. Many Baptists at the popular level felt that education in a Baptist college should involve what college professors might call indoctrination. Whereas they were interested in education: looking at a given question or problem and helping people to think using their minds, making distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, better and best, the timely, the timeless, even the Godly and the Godless. And the issue was not to take a package of truth and put it in a capsule and say swallow this, but the idea was to take a body of truth and say 'run it through your minds, look at alternatives, if this is true why is this true, if this is true why is this truth better than some other truth.' And in a liberal arts college you engage in that kind of process. There's a sense in which it has to do not so much with accumulating knowledge and facts and data, as learning how to use the noggin. And Baptists through the years had difficulty understanding that kind of distinction or that kind of process. One of the things that created problems is that Baptist ministers, I think in particular, had difficulty understanding the human predicament. Institutions like a college is made up of human beings, faculty, staff, students, sometimes they don't do good. Sometimes they mess up. Sometimes they make mistakes. Sometimes they do things that are wrong. The minister often could understand this in his congregation but had difficulty understanding it in an institution and would become immensely critical

of the institution when he observed something that was not right, whereas with an individual human life if one is a Christian there's a sense in which your daily stance is one of repentance, you never do, do everything right...

Dr. Tollison: Forgiveness

Mr. Roberts: Yes, and also the daily stance of a Christian institution as it strives to be Christian, if it does, is one of daily repentance.

Dr. Tollison: Can you offer particular examples in the decade prior to the split where there was a fundamental conflict?

Mr. Roberts: Well, let me give one that's a little bit off base from what I was saying but it's one that comes to my mind. There was a sense in which there was a bias against education on the part of Baptists. We had a minister in the state, a Furman graduate, quite gifted, provocative, creative, named Bill Lancaster. At the time he was minister of First Baptist Church in Orangeburg, later First Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. He gave a convocation address at Furman that had the title, this was not the subject but the title, an eye-catching title, "The Church Can Go To Hell." It was remarkable communication. And what he was saying that hell is a place void of the will of God and void of the purpose of God and in this world there are all kinds of hellish situations, void of God's presence, void of God's will, and he described some of them: poverty, drugs, alcohol, and he gave a long series of them, and he said there not only can the church go to this hellish situation but the church must go, this is our assignment. It was a great talk. But, the newspaper the next day, on the front page, "Furman Convocation Speaker, Church Can Go to Hell." Now, the article in the newspaper was basically a good article, it was good reporting, but some people can't read, they only read headlines, and there was quite an outcry, you know, across the state, because of that particular address.

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about that a little bit. At what point did you start to feel... this is a good question since you've been around working as assistant to presidents since 1971... At what point did it cross your mind that this might be something that may happen one day. John Plyler told me that he had this conversation with his father before his father died in 1966. So that tells me that pretty early on there was a sense that one day this might be the case. At what point did that strike you?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, well, going back to the John Plyler and John Plyler, Jr., type thing, I think it's apparent that the kind of commitment that the trustees of Furman made in 1956 in the context of the move to the new campus, there was a renewed type commitment to the South Carolina Baptist Convention and that included a kind of promise of a sort not to ever change the charter, and so it's apparent that even back in those days in the back of some people's minds there was concern in this particular area. In my own mind as I came to work for Furman University in 1971, I never conceived of a time when Furman would separate itself from the



denomination. I believe that there was tension, I believe that there was inevitable tension because of the difference in Jerusalem and Athens as I like to put it. But I felt that this was a difference that could be accepted and lived with, where there could be still an element of gracious and helpful and supportive cooperation because of mutual interests and commitments that the Convention had that Furman had, and it was a tension that we could live with, with some disciplined type control. I think that when Gordon Blackwell brought the vision of excellence by national standards that gradually this kind of concept probably inevitably heightened the tension that Furman had with the denomination along the way. And as we became more and more selective, not only with the choice of faculty, but more so with the choice of students, South Carolina Baptist had their difficulty in this area. Let's say you take a country church, and they have a young lady that to them is the most attractive young lady that they've had in a long time in their church. They conceive of her as a good student, she's a 'B' student in school, but her SAT scores are not good. And in some ways this is not her fault. This relates to South Carolina. This relates to the school of which she is a part, and often that young lady would not be admitted to Furman. The people in that congregation would pick up on this. The minister of course would pick up on it. They could not understand why Furman, a Baptist institution, would not accept this young lady, who to them was so gifted and so attractive. I remember one such young lady, there's a sense in which I was describing her, and she had some 'As' along with her 'Bs' but her SAT score was atrocious, and we turned her down. And I went to the director of admissions and I went to the president of Furman and I would say I would appreciate it if this young lady was admitted. And I said I believe that given the opportunity she'll be a good student at this institution. She was admitted, she graduated cum laude, and maybe other than somebody on the football team she probably had the lowest SAT scores of anybody that was admitted that year. But she had come from a school system that was just not strong and she had not had the opportunity and had not had the home environment that was conducive to learning and studying. But when she became a student at Furman she did remarkably well.

Dr. Tollison: Would you say it goes beyond that, however, in terms of upsetting the Convention because a student wasn't admitted here and there, I mean, do you feel that there is something fundamentally incompatible with an institution or organization whose purpose is primarily religious and an institution whose purpose is primarily educational?

Mr. Roberts: No, I don't accept the idea that there is an incompatibility here. I strongly disagree with Tertullian though I know he was a great man. I believe that there is a relationship between Jerusalem and Athens, and in my own mind the way I looked at this was, take South Carolina. Instead of just having Furman University, was had a family of four colleges, North Greenville, Anderson, both junior colleges then, Baptist College at Charleston. And these colleges were a kind of family and three of them embraced students of all kinds. But a college that embraces students of all kinds is not able to meet the needs of the

bright gifted student.

Dr. Tollison: Do you mean Baptist students of all kinds?

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: So not necessarily socio-politically, or perhaps socio-politically diverse, but not necessary religiously diverse?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, what I'm saying is you take a Baptist student, I'll give an example. A young lady whose father owned a business that was known state-wide and beyond state-wide, very attractive, very gifted, wanted to come to Furman. She did not want to go anywhere else. She applied and of course we promptly accepted her application. Another college wanted her. She was the kind of young lady any college would be glad to have. But another college wanted her, and so the president of the university went to the home and met with her father and with her...

Dr. Tollison: The president of...

Mr. Roberts: the other college.

Dr. Tollison: Would you care to, is it another college in South Carolina?

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: Another one of the Baptist colleges?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. And told her that if she would come to that college everything would be free, she wouldn't have to pay anything. It's hard to beat free. And so her dad suggested that she go there, it was free. Of course the father was quite wealthy, you know, worth a few million dollars, I don't know exactly what, but it's hard to beat free. So the girl went to the other institution and when she came home Christmas sat down at the breakfast table the first morning her father said "how's school?" She said "okay." He said "what do you mean okay?" She said "well it's just okay." He said "explain that." This young lady was very bright, very gifted, had been a good student. She said "I have not heard one professor say one thing in one class that I did not know in the tenth grade." And her father said to her "I apologize." He said "Do you still want to go to Furman?" She said "Yes." Her father did not know me but he got my name from his minister and called me up and told me what had happened. And he said can I get her admitted winter term at Furman. I was aware of her original application because of who her father was, frankly was the reason that I was aware of that. I said "I think so," and I said "I may be ought to be saying I know so but I said Mr. so-and-so I am

not the director of admissions and I said I do not have the authority to say that. However," I said "could I call you back later today." And he said "oh yes." And so I went to the director of admissions and asked if this could be processed immediately, and we already had the transcript and so that young lady was admitted and came to Furman and had a very happy experience and a growing experience and if I recall correctly made two 'Cs.' But that said something about the difference in the classrooms and the way things are conducted in one college and another college. Now, having said that, does that mean this other college is bad? No, it means it's different. It means that college has a place, a proper place, a good place, and they can make a contribution, a helpful contribution to students of a certain type. But it also means that you need a few colleges, at least a few colleges, that are for the student that wants to excel so that his mind, her mind, can be challenged and have an opportunity to grow. And that's the way I viewed this entire process.

Dr. Tollison: So perhaps a better question is do you feel that there is something perhaps not incompatible but problematic between an educational institution that seeks excellence by national standards and a relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention, or specifically the South Carolina Baptist Convention?

Mr. Roberts: I think there is something problematic. I think there is an inevitable tension between a college moving toward excellence and any denomination, not just Baptist. Methodist, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, whatever, it would make no difference. If the college is moving toward excellence in a meaningful way, there inevitably will be an element of tension and problems. This is something that I foresaw and at the administrative retreat, July 29-30, 1986, I wrote a paper that I gave at the administrative retreat that relates to this particular situation. A Furman moving toward excellence being more selective in the choice of their students and I'm saying among other things the word 'selective' should be tempered with the word 'equity,' but in a family of four Baptist colleges, the word 'selective' may appropriately be used by Furman. The denomination should unapologetically be affirmed and served, but that does not mean that the current winds of the Convention should determine the set of the sail.

Dr. Tollison: And what were the current winds of the Convention at that point in time?

Mr. Roberts: Well, the current winds of the Convention would vary from time to time, but among those air currents would be criticisms of Furman about selectivity of students, criticism of Furman about selectivity of faculty members, criticism of Furman about all this money we're spending on rose gardens and campus. I had one man who was with a group visiting here from a small Baptist church and this man was familiar with granite and the cost of granite. And he noticed that in the inner part of the Furman campus instead of concrete curbing you had granite curbing, and he became quite upset because he thought Baptist money was being used to pay for expensive granite when they could have had cement curbing. Well the fact of the matter was it didn't cost South Carolina Baptist one penny. That was paid for elsewhere in another way. But the man didn't

understand that and tensions of different types surfaced from different people from time to time.

Dr. Tollison: Do you feel that the relationship was more heavy-handed than at other denominational institutions? Would it be fair to compare Wofford's relationship with the Methodist conference or Davidson's relationship with the Presbyterian conference?

Mr. Roberts: No, there is a difference between Wofford and the denomination and Davidson and the denomination, and that's something that I allude to in this paper that I did in 1988. The difference is the nature of church government in Baptist denomination. See, in the Presbyterian way of doing things or the Methodist way of doing things there's just not an occasion that some individual may be a little naive and uninformed, maybe a knot head, can stand up and be especially critical....

Dr. Tollison: So it's the democratic nature of the Baptist Convention?

Mr. Roberts: The Baptist approach to democracy is something that is great and it is something that's fearful.

Dr. Tollison: So you feel this is why Davidson and the Presbyterians, and Sewanee and the Episcopalians maybe don't necessarily have....

Mr. Roberts: The nature of church governments you have, you're talking basically to a select delegated group of leadership or to a select board rather than anybody. But in the Baptist denomination a messenger who has been to the third grade who has some kind of negative feelings say toward Furman in his craw can stand up at the convention and make a pretty strong accusation against the university on a solid basis or a basis that is entirely false, and other denominations don't have that kind of situation.

Dr. Tollison: Let's get back to sort of this 1980s lead up to the 1990 efforts to figure out how we're going to handle this situation.

Mr. Roberts: Okay, in that paper that I wrote in 1986, where I was foreseeing growing tension, growing hostility toward Furman as we moved toward excellence, as we became more selective, I related it to the Furman heritage as the oldest Baptist college in the South, a rugged root system there, our geographical location. In a given year only 650 students in all of South Carolina out of 18,000 would make 600 or above on the verbal part of the SAT. With respect to educational rank, South Carolina is 48<sup>th</sup> or 49<sup>th</sup>, depending on which kind of chart you are using. The denomination that Furman served is a South Carolina Baptist institution was rooted and grounded in that kind of setting and environment. You had the problem of the legal heavy in the relationship which is at the charter. In this paper I made the statement the charter is airtight. That was not true, but I believed that because that's what I had always been

told by very responsible people.

Dr. Tollison: Airtight in its relationship, in its tie to the....

Mr. Roberts: Yes, the charter makes Furman's relationship to the Convention something that was airtight. You know I stated that in this paper. That was not true, but I did not know that at the time, I had been told that, and I think as far as I know every single member of the administration would have believed that at the time.

Dr. Tollison: So at this point in time there's not a thinking that we're going to sever, there's a thinking that we're going to make the best of the situation?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, we're going to make the best, we're going to live with the tension, and make the best of the situation, and in our own way serve the denomination. But serve the denomination as a quality academic institution.

Dr. Tollison: So you're trying to find a way not to compromise what Furman's goals were at the time?

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: But maintain that relationship at the same time. Well, let's get into the nitty gritty. Let's start talking about 1990. You mentioned something earlier that confused me a little bit. I've been told that a group of alumni approached the president, Dr. Johns at the time, and expressed a concern about what was going on, it was a group of attorneys, and wanted to look into the charter. Is that correct, is that how you remember this happening?

Mr. Roberts: I remember this basically happening apart from encouragement or very much communication with the president..

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Mr. Roberts: With respect to the kind of thing the alumni association did with this task force, there is an earlier background. When Gordon Blackwell was president at Furman we had an element of tension that arose with the denomination that was momentary. It surfaced and it went away. Or it seemed to go away. It occurred at a meeting of the general board of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, Dr. Blackwell and I were there, and two separate people spoke critically of Furman. The second one spoke some critical words concerning some changes that needed to be made in the academic structure and programming at Furman. I worked with Dr. Blackwell and I traveled with Dr. Blackwell a great deal, and got to know him in many ways. He was a gracious, gracious, compassionate, caring southern gentleman. But on this occasion it was as if the hairs on the back of his head raised up and some redness got there, and with controlled anger he stood up and in forthright wording let it be known that the general board or the South Carolina Baptist Convention would not interfere with the academic structure and programming of Furman University. And that was basically all that he said,

but he said it so forthrightly that frankly I was surprised, and I think everybody else was surprised knowing Dr. Blackwell. But there was something about that, that seemed to put a kind of quietness on what was going on, but in that context we met with the attorney for the institution and requested that they look at the legal relationship with the convention. Some kind of report came back to Dr. Blackwell. As far as I know that report was never shared with any other administrative official or even with the trustees. It was basically just put in a file.

Dr. Tollison: Is this the, quote, Haynsworth research?

Mr. Roberts: No, this was again done by Tommy Thomason.

Dr. Tollison: What time period are you talking about? During Dr. Blackwell's presidency?

Mr. Roberts: It would have been during his last year or two, I'm guessing there, I don't have a specific date. I would say during the last year or two. But whatever that report said I do not know, and as far as I know, nothing ever came of that report. But, in 1990, the Furman Alumni Association, as it would normally do, had different kinds of progress, different kinds of projects, and they appointed four task forces by four different groups. One of them was given the assignment of looking at the Furman charter and the legal relationship that Furman had to the Baptist Convention. On this committee were placed Furman alumni who were all very bright gifted lawyers who had become well established in their law firms. There were five separate law firms represented in that study. In the letter that I wrote to the ministers I comment on that in some way to say this, earlier in the year the Furman Alumni Association established four task forces related to the University. These task forces were neither prompted by or under the direction of Furman officials. One of these task forces composed of alumni in five separate law firms did research on Furman's legal relationship to the Convention. Their study of the Furman Charter was in the context of South Carolina Law. On August 30, they, I say they, it was Mike Ray, an attorney with the Rice Firm, and what I call the Rice Firm in Winston-Salem, presented their detailed conclusions, with schedules and deadlines, to three members of the Furman Administration, Wayne Weaver, John Johns, and myself. The president of Furman then requested that the law firm we had related to in July, I need to comment on that, review and evaluate the material. Upon concluding that the suggested direction was legally appropriate the law firm contracted with an additional law firm to study and to review the material. This gave the endorsement of seven separate law firms to the possibility and the legality of Furman separating itself from the Convention. In July of that same year, a little over a month before that August 30 date, Dr. Johns and I and Wayne Weaver and Frank Bonner met with the Furman attorney and his associate...

Dr. Tollison: Tommy Thomason?

Mr. Roberts: Tommy Thomason, yes, and requested that they proceed with legal research in this area. And that research was basically just cranking up and ongoing when the results of the Alumni task force were presented to us.

Dr. Tollison: So did Tommy instigate? That's the story I've been told, but you're saying that's not correct, is that?

Mr. Roberts: I do not know that there was an individual who instigated this. I think that there were people like our attorney, Tommy Thomason, like Larry Estridge, like Mike Ray and his associate in his law firm, [Kirk Stateman?], both of whom had been student body presidents at Furman. People like Dave Ellison, who had a concern about the growing tension and the conflicts and this was being viewed by some, especially in the overall problems of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the kind to take over by fundamentalists of Southern Seminary, Southeastern Seminary, later Southwestern Seminary. It was in the context of problems that they were having at Stetson, at Baylor, at Mercer, at the University of Richmond, and what people did not understand, people at large did not understand, that when a problem would happen, let's say at Stetson, Furman would know about it that same day. You know, I would receive a phone call, or John Johns would get a phone call, or a Furman faculty member in the Religion Department would get a phone call, and we did not have to wait on a news release.

Dr. Tollison: Now how did Wake Forest figure into this?

Mr. Roberts: The Wake Forest situation was different. Wake Forest, historically, had more front-and-center conflicts, confrontations with the Convention, than Furman ever had. But the North Carolina Convention was always more open to conversation than the South Carolina Convention at times was, and so when Wake Forest moved in the direction of severing relationships with the Convention in a stipulated kind of way, the North Carolina Baptist Convention basically said "you have our approval but we want you to have a continuing presence, with no funding, no funding, but a continuing presence, a continuing cooperative relationship, we want your presence on the education board of the State Baptist Convention," and that kind of thing. South Carolina Baptists, when they chose to sever they wanted the severance thorough going rather than keeping something of a relationship that North Carolina Baptists did with Wade Forest.

Dr. Tollison: And is that because of a tone that had developed that was different in the South Carolina Convention?

Mr. Roberts: I think so. I think the South Carolina Convention had a more aggressive, a more disciplined group of people that some would label fundamentalist of a takeover type that were speaking and acting. The South Carolina Baptist Convention leadership as such preferred the continuing covenant relationship with Furman.

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about how Dr. Johns handled this on a personal level. You mentioned that it took quite a toll on him.

Mr. Roberts: Dr. Johns highly respected, highly respected South Carolina Baptists and Furman University as a South Carolina Baptist institution. His commitment, his gut feelings, in this particular area were genuine, they were solid. Dr. Johns had a gift, it relating to plain folk Baptists. You know he used the word small steeple. You know he would say, Joe you go to those high steeple churches, I'm going to these small steeple churches. And he had a gift of relating to them and it was a gift that was important to him and it was meaningful. However, as things progressed and there seemed to be a move in the direction of placing people on the Furman Board who would be amenable to changing the nature of the institution so that it could no longer have the same quality as a liberal arts college, then Dr. Johns felt like the institution must be protected. And so he gave his blessing, I think reluctantly, but gave his blessing reluctantly under the circumstances because he wanted to look after the best interest of Furman.

Dr. Tollison: He probably felt that he had no other option?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. Well, no other options if Furman was going to continue to be the kind of institution it was and was aspiring to be.

Dr. Tollison: Right. You mentioned that a former president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, who is also a Furman trustee and in the fundamentalist camp, wanted to have a private conversation with you. Could you tell me a little more about how that developed?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. We had a committee of the trustees that was meeting that had to do among other things with denominational relationships and I was asked some very direct forthright questions. This was after the Furman trustees had taken their actions on October 15, 1990. It was a trustee meeting of the following January. And I answered those questions because I thought it was appropriate for me to answer those questions. But then I was asked the direct question of under the circumstances what can we do that would be good for Furman but South Carolina Baptists might agree to. I started answering that question and in the dynamic of the situation I was sidetracked so that there was a miscommunication of what I was saying, something that I deeply regretted but I didn't have control over the situation. But following that meeting...

Dr. Tollison: Would you mind telling me what happened in that meeting, what you were communicating and then what...

Mr. Roberts: I was basically communicating something of what we could do as an institution that the committee might agree with, and it was a kind of very loose take off on part of the substance of that white paper that Dr. Johns had asked me to do related to this same subject. But in getting into it, the conversation went off on



another direction where I did not have control and what I was saying was misunderstood by some people because I only gave about one-fourth of what I wanted to say, and to me it was an unfortunate kind of effort at communication but something that I could not do anything about. And following that meeting my good friend, George Dye, former president of the Convention, and looked upon as someone who was a leader among fundamentalists, approached me and asked if I would be agreeable to coming to Fort Mill and just having some conversation with him about what to do. And I told him that I would be agreeable to coming to Fort Mill and I needed to qualify maybe some of the substance and the subject of our conversation, but that we would work that out at a later date, but that I would come. I spoke to Dr. Johns about that invite knowing something of his strategic importance as a Furman trustee, as an influential minister among fundamentalists in South Carolina. Dr. Johns says "I want you to go and to have that conversation." And at that point I stated to him, to Dr. Johns, that whatever I say will inevitably be interpreted by him as coming from you, even though part of what I say or all of what I say may not be coming from you, but he's going to hear me echoing your sentiments. That being the case, let's talk about what I can say. Can I more or less echo the kind of contents that was in the white paper. He said "Yes, you may." And it was through that conversation and George Dye's close friendship with Robert [?Schrum?] who became head of the covenant type committee that word was sort of passed on that this is something that Furman might agree to. And so there was a communication between that white paper in a direct or indirect way and the tentative or theoretical covenant relationship that we talked about for a period of some months.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. Now is this where you all developed the situation that, I'm trying to remember the details of it specifically, that was voted on at the '91 Convention that Dr. Johns had prepared the arrangement in which I believe Furman would appoint six trustees and then the remaining, however many, there would be a list provided and the Baptist Convention would agree to pick strictly from this list and then there was an altered relationship that was being voted on?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. Yes.

Dr. Tollison: Does this derive from this conversation?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. The substance of it came from the original white paper that I prepared for Dr. Johns. The idea, though, in the Covenant relationship was that we would present the list. Let's say we were electing five trustees. We would present ten names. The selections that the Convention made would have to come from the names we submitted.

Dr. Tollison: Whereas before it didn't?

Mr. Roberts: Whereas before, submitting those names was a privilege that they did not necessarily have to honor.

Dr. Tollison: And also Furman would have a certain percentage of the Board that it would have to appoint that didn't necessarily have to be So Con Baptist?

Mr. Roberts: Yeah. That was under the Covenant relationship.

Dr. Tollison: Right.

Mr. Roberts: Now. The idea of Furman giving the two names was something that I started when I was a trustee at Furman when I was the chairman of the nominating committee for trustees for the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

Dr. Tollison: You said let's have Furman provide us with some choices here?

Mr. Roberts: No, I would not have done that. I said "let's have all agencies and institutions that have boards, provide us with twice the number of names of individuals they wanted selected."

Dr. Tollison: Okay. So, then it wasn't necessarily Furman (laughs).

Mr. Roberts: And really, front-and-center in my mind was not Furman University. Front-and-center in my mind was the Baptist Foundation of South Carolina.

Dr. Tollison: Uh huh.

Mr. Roberts: The reason for that: the head of the Baptist Foundation at Furman, when he found out I had been head of the nominating committee for the following year, called me up and came to see me. I was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Woodruff then, and I didn't know exactly what he wanted. I figured he wanted to talk about something about the Convention work. But when he came into my office, he was angry; quite angry about the people that the Convention had placed on his board of trustees. People with no competence, no expertise for the work of the Baptist Foundation, people with no background to make a contribution, some of whom had no interest. One of whom who stated, after he was elected, he would never come to a meeting because he didn't care about that.

Dr. Tollison: This was a genuine effort to improve the quality of the Board.

Mr. Roberts: Yeah. And so I thought about that, and I said "You know, if I were in his position, and the Convention gave me people that couldn't help me. I would be angry too." So, in that context, I prepared a proposal which we just carried out. I didn't get permission on it. We just did it... of requesting each agency and institution to give us two names for each person that they wanted, and they understood this was a privilege, not some kind of right. And that initial effort then was continued through the years after I had done it that one year.

Dr. Tollison: So, that started in '68-'69?

Mr. Roberts: Yes, that would have been '68 or '69 that we did that.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. We've got about 31 minutes, so... Let's talk about what you brought here and any other things that you think is important to cover. Let's talk about your particular contributions... what insights you have that I may not gain elsewhere.

Mr. Roberts: Okay, let's talk about this. With the changing of the charter we had an occasion, we had a series of occasions when we became aware there was misinformation, there was false information being given about Furman. Front-and-center among that was that Furman had been trying to separate itself from the Convention over the years. In that context I wrote a letter to the pastors of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, this had Dr. Johns' approval, in which I gave a history of things, admittedly from my perspective, where I clarified over the years how it was that Furman had never, had never, never at one time made an effort or any effort to separate itself from the Convention. On the contrary, Furman had sought through the years and made commitments through the years even with its future planning a cooperative relationship, a supportive relationship with South Carolina Baptist. Now I did point out some inconsistencies or exceptions to that. The first being, about 18 years prior to '91, perceiving a threat to Furman's academic credibility, the administration requested that a law firm research the legal relationship between Furman and the Convention. This was during the closing days of Dr. Blackwell's presidency. The results of that study from the law firm is something, as far as I know, was never really presented to anybody.

Dr. Tollison: Do you know where those results are?

Mr. Roberts: I do not know where those results are. I assume they are somewhere in Dr. Blackwell's files. But I do not know that. And then I dealt with a couple of little incidental things but then I stated that throughout all the years of my personal acquaintance with Furman while there may have been some occasional remark there has been no concerted move no formalized desire for a separation of governance. The intent of the Furman family has been expressed in Furman's strategic plan which expresses the goal of a continuing, meaningful and cooperative relationship between Furman and the Convention. This official document has had the approval of trustees, administration and faculty. And then after that I begin to deal with the growing apprehension within the Convention and with the Furman community about the kind of thing happening in other places in the South Baptist Convention and then even within the nominating committee of the South Carolina Baptist Convention when it came to naming trustees. And so in the light of that you know Dr. Johns had his meeting with the law firm in July of 1990. Earlier in that same year the alumni task force had been appointed to study the firm charter and the legal relationship with the Convention. But in that letter I was seeking that through the years Furman had no desire to separate itself from the Convention but had a commitment to the

Convention up until the takeover type thing from the fundamentalist mind set surfaced.

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about the 1991 convention in which that covenant that you and George Dye, is that his name, you all had sort of hammered out.

Mr. Roberts: The covenant relationship that was talked about by the Convention's committee and the Furman administration and the Furman trustees for a period of some months had at its background a white paper that I had written for Dr. Johns at Dr. Johns' request about the kind of thing, conceivably, that we might work out with the Convention under the circumstances. In that paper for Dr. Johns I had done a kind of take-off on the situation at three Baptist colleges in the Southern Baptist Convention. These were William Jewell, the University of Richmond, and Mercer University. William Jewell, a Baptist college, in her history has always had a self-perpetuating board of trustees. They elect their own trustees and then as a courtesy-type gesture they present it to the Convention and the Convention uses the word "endorse" not "improve" to the trustees that the William Jewell board has already picked. The University of Richmond also has a self-perpetuating board of trustees. Twenty percent of that number, just twenty percent of their board, can be nominated by Virginia Baptist. The rest is nominated by the Richmond board and of the twenty percent that Virginia Baptist elect, they present two names, I believe it is, not three, I think it's two names for each one position and then, not they, but the Richmond board trustees selects the final individuals from the twenty percent they have nominated. And then you have the situation at Mercer University where in her history the Mercer administration presents two names for each individual spot on the board of trustees and then the Georgia Baptist Convention selects from the names submitted by the administration at Mercer University. They cannot insert another name. And so what I did was propose a solution where I borrowed a little bit from Mercer, a little bit from William Jewell, a little bit from the University of Richmond procedure to come up with a kind of a conclusion. And the covenant arrangement that we ended up talking about over a period of some months was a kind of a "first cousin" take-off on that kind of possibility.

Dr. Tollison: So, you all felt when you went into the Convention in November of 1991 that you had an arrangement that was suitable to Furman and suitable to the Baptist Convention.

Mr. Roberts: Yes, and the Furman administration and the Furman trustees were agreeable to that solution.

Dr. Tollison: And the leadership of the South Carolina Baptist Convention was as well, presumably.

Mr. Roberts: The leadership of the South Carolina Baptist Convention was very much in favor of the covenant that we had worked out.

Dr. Tollison: So the problem developed, you all ran into a problem when it went to a vote.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. When I arrived at the Convention that day a person who had been on the Furman board, front-and-center with the fundamentalist takeover. His wife had been on the board of the [?hall?] mission board of the Southern Baptist Convention when there was a takeover there. His son was the most feared takeover type fundamentalist by Stetson in the state of Florida. When I pulled up in the parking lot he saw me, this man saw me, and he told me that he was not going to accept the covenant and that he would be making a motion, a substitute type motion to sever all relationships with Furman. And so I proceeded as quickly as I could to notify Dr. Johns of the action that he was going to be taking.

Dr. Tollison: Was he aware that, was there a feeling that this was what Furman wanted? That it could be even more beneficial? Or was it a genuine feeling that Furman wanted to stay, they just wanted to alter their relationship?

Mr. Roberts: He understood that Furman wanted to alter their relationship, he understood that Furman wanted to stay with some relationship, you know, with the Convention but one way of putting it, and I don't think this is unfair, is the fundamentalist mindset when it thinks of authority and control thinks in terms of total control and total authority.

Dr. Tollison: So it's an all or nothing, black and white...

Mr. Roberts: Yes, it's black and white, it's all or nothing and the idea of shared responsibility is something that they have difficulty embracing I think is the way to put it.

Dr. Tollison: It gets back to that notion of reason that you mentioned earlier to an extent, does it not? Of a very reasonable arrangement.

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Dr. Tollison: It makes sense, but there's no level-headedness, that doesn't seem like a very level-headed approach.

Mr. Roberts: Well, in a way it's not. But you know it's like again, this may be unfair and I don't want to be unfair to anybody but I speak of some people having what I call a "Gunsmoke" mentality. One of the reasons that "Gunsmoke" was such a popular tv show, that everything was simple, it was black and white, you didn't have gray in "Gunsmoke." It was deliberately written for a sixth-grade mentality. No episode could get above an eighth-grade mentality. Preferably everything stay at a sixth-grade mentality or below. As soon as an individual popped on the screen you could just look at him and you knew whether he was good or bad. You didn't have to wait until the plot developed and I think some people have a mentality of dealing with black and white. The idea of gray is something that is, that they will not embrace. It's either-or, it is not both-and. And they have difficulty having

any other kind of approach to it.

Dr. Tollison: Let's talk about specifically the events of the Convention. So, there was a motion made by this gentlemen that you ran into in the car to completely sever relations. I understand that Dr. Johns was fairly baffled by this, that this was not at all what you all had expected.

Mr. Roberts: It is not what we had expected. We had expected a vote, that would probably be fairly close, but would probably affirm the covenant relationship.

Dr. Tollison: Why do you think there was dissent? Because I know this happened during desegregation debates, as well, in 1960s where the Baptist Convention, where the leadership of the Convention has worked out an arrangement, has endorsed something, whatever. And then again we get back to the democratic nature of the Convention as a body. The body essentially votes against the recommendation of the leadership.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. Well this has to do with the Baptist attempt at democracy. If you have an issue like the segregation issue, like the Furman severance issue, those are the two classic examples, you have people coming from churches that ordinarily would never be present at anything like a Baptist Convention. And they are bussed in, you know, by the dozens, sometimes by the hundreds and the vote is altered in a very significant kind of way as to what it ordinarily might be. But it's the kind of price that you pay for democracy or an attempt at democracy.

Dr. Tollison: So, let's talk about... It's voted down. How did Dr. Johns react?

Mr. Roberts: Well, at that convention as they talked about severing all relations with Furman, about not giving Furman the escrowed money for scholarship funds, a couple of times things were said that were not exactly correct. I was sitting with Dr. Johns and after this happened the second time I leaned over and I said "Does this issue and maybe the other issue need to be addressed? If so, I'd be glad to do so." And at that point I think under the circumstances he had concluded that it looked like a simple majority or more had come to the Convention to sever relationships and he basically said let's just let the Convention proceed.

Dr. Tollison: That was interesting that this had evidently been a conversation among South Carolina Baptists, perhaps not the leadership, but that Furman never really was aware that it was taking place before the Convention. Was there no...

Mr. Roberts: As far as I know, there was no awareness about the substitute motion. Now we were aware that there were people against the covenant and we were aware that there were people that were saying we either need to have total control or we need to sever relationships. We were very much aware of that. And with the different groups, of course, you basically had Furman, the Furman administration, the Furman trustees, the Convention elected leadership, and then you had a group that was labeled the fundamentalist takeover types and I

engaged in three-way conversations back and forth with these people as a kind of messenger boy. And it was like the old Greek story, you know none of the three liked the message I was delivering and so you shoot the messenger. And so I had, in trying to relate to anybody and everybody and to communicate honestly and accurately, I had what to me was a difficult, emotional assignment. But as we approached that final Convention we basically finally pretty well gave up trying to have conversation with the takeover strategists because in our minds they did not understand what we would call dialog. If you met with them they wanted to give directives. We wanted to engage in dialog and so basically we felt that we had run up against a stone wall in a sense and so we continued to use our time and energy as best we could to talk to people that were more amenable to dialog, or what [inaudible] called the miracle of dialog.

Dr. Tollison: Okay, let's talk about this interim period after November 1991 and between the actual press conference announcing the split. What goes on during this time period? You all ceased dialog.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. I think relationships and contacts were much more limited.

Dr. Tollison: There was threat of a lawsuit?

Mr. Roberts: Well yes, we had the threat of the lawsuit. And so after November of '91... Well in some ways after November of '90 conversation got to be more limited in some circles and there's some things about the lawsuit that might be worthwhile for us to talk about.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mr. Roberts: The week before the Furman vote by the Furman trustees on 10/15/90 Dr. Johns called me down to his office and said "We need to talk about Judge Gregory." Judge Gregory was a member of the board of trustees. He was the Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court, a personal friend of mine, a very close friend of mine for many reasons. Dr. Johns said "How is Judge Gregory going to vote?" and I said "Well," I said "I can't speak for Judge Gregory," but I said "Knowing his mindset I believe that Judge Gregory is going to vote in favor of our going ahead with the charter change." And he said "Well, let me ask you this. Would you be willing to go to Chester and have a conversation with him?" I said "I'll be glad to go." And so I did. And so since he was Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court and, conceivably, if this ended up in court he would be front-and-center. So, I drove to Chester to have a conversation with Judge Gregory and we went over a series of things and he said "You'll have my support." And he said "Now, admittedly what I know is what Furman has told me and I have surface information." He said at some later date "I may need to look at things more closely." And I said "We understand that."

Dr. Tollison: Right, but for now...

Mr. Roberts: And so I came back. Now before we had the actual vote, the idea of, well, suing somehow came into the picture and Judge Gregory in one of the meetings excused himself from voting and did not vote because he felt like that he did not want to be on the record voting on this if, in fact, it ended up in his court, you know, at a later date. And so understandably he excused himself. But in relation to this area, and I believe it was May 1991, we had taken our board action in October of the previous year, we became aware that a person related to the state supreme court maybe at their own initiative, maybe by assignment, we didn't know the answer to that, but had gone ahead and done some research on what Furman had done and concluded that it did have a sound legal basis. And this was, you know, someone who was related to the office of the state supreme court and that was just background work. It was the kind of word we were glad to get even though it was preliminary, unofficial, and that kind of thing. Also there were many people including the executive secretary of the South Carolina Baptist Convention who had said "Well there's no threat to the taking over of the board at Furman. Well, that could be subject to debate. In our judgement there was a definite threat on the horizon, but I believe it was in March of 1991 I was offered a tape that apparently had been secretly made of a takeover strategy meeting of Baptist institutions. The meeting was held in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was led by a primary personality from Texas, front-and-center in the takeover type movement.

Dr. Tollison: From Houston, Texas?

Mr. Roberts: Yeah. And they were talking in a blunt, straight forward [inaudible] kind of way a procedure of how to take over institutions such as Furman. When I became aware of this tape I immediately told Dr. Johns about what I had been told and the tape was in a safe place. I could have gone, as I understood it, and picked up that tape. I did not do so. I decided to wait and to just leave it where it was unless there was, in fact, official legal action, you know, taking Furman to court. But that tape would have had significance assuming we had proceeded with some kind of a court lawsuit.

Dr. Tollison: Certainly. Okay, let's go on from there in terms of... there was... Furman obviously didn't want to engage in a lawsuit and that was ultimately what happened, that the lawsuit did not go through. Is this on the part of South Carolina Baptist that said let's just quietly work this out among ourselves or...

Mr. Roberts: Yes, there was the attempt of South Carolina Baptist to work it out among ourselves and momentarily we had the covenant type relationship but in the end the fundamentalist type mindset in the South Carolina Baptist Convention thought of no shared control or authority with respect to electing any board. They wanted total control and so the idea was to either have total control or sever the relationship and so in that kind of dilemma the Convention severed the relationship. To me it was regretful that they did not maintain in the departure sometime of friendly continuation like they did in North Carolina with Wake Forest. To me the primary law of friendship is the law of association and if you



don't have some means, maybe some structure, of continuing an association then you inevitably drift apart and are not only no longer friendly, you just don't know each other anymore and South Carolina was not agreeable to affording some kind of structure, as North Carolina had done with Wake Forest, of continuing in at least a limited way the primary law of friendship, the law of association.

Dr. Tollison: Up until... there was a very emotional meeting among the board of trustees before the vote to sever where people circulated around the table and made personal statements essentially before a vote was taken. Do you recall that meeting?

Mr. Roberts: Well, yes, I don't remember it being all that confrontational...

Dr. Tollison: Uh, I don't mean confrontational, perhaps just bitter sweet in a way. I had been told about Alester Furman was somewhat emotional about the historical sense.

Mr. Roberts: Yes, yes Alester Furman the third, of course, is an ongoing part of a great heritage. This heritage is not just important to him, it's important to all the generations before him with whom he strongly identified had been about and the fundamentalist takeover mindset that might use as a role model Tennessee Temple in Chattanooga or Bob Jones or Toccoa Falls Bible Institute was something so foreign to Alester Furman's image of who Furman University was and who Furman University ought to be that he had difficulty even having a conversation, you know, in this area. And so we had on the Furman board of trustees already twenty-five, four or five people, who had something, something of a fundamentalist type mindset. And so we had some words spoken where parliamentary procedure was not followed altogether and there was blunt disagreement. But I would not call it... I've been in meetings where you had disagreements that were so emotional that things were out of control... It was nothing like that. To me it was nothing like that.

Dr. Tollison: So, cordial, still respectful, but I mean certainly this meeting there was a tone of...

Mr. Roberts: Yes, it was disruptive and, you know, we used the phrase 'good decency and order in procedure' and so there was a little bit of a disruption there, but forthright disagreement.

Dr. Tollison: So this decision, while it was sort of a relief, was also... there was a feeling of, well maybe, among the "Alester Furmans" on the board, those who felt like he did, that they wished they didn't have to come to those terms, that it didn't have to necessarily be that way.

Mr. Roberts: Yes. Mr. Furman would, well, unapologetically speak for Furman continuing the kind of heritage that it had had through the years and I think at the time there were at least twenty other members of the board who would have agreed with

him. Furman's problem was with the takeover type thing that had been going on some other places in the Southern Baptist Convention with them having conceivably five votes already, conceivably in two more years, if they totally control the situation, they could have a clear majority of fifteen and so it was for that reason that Furman felt they needed to act and they needed to go ahead and act decisively.

Dr. Tollions: They needed a two-thirds board vote for any...

Mr. Roberts: Well it depends on what you're talking about.

BREAK

Dr. Tollison: That you'd like to add about this...

Mr. Roberts: Let me add one additional thing. The kind of moneys that South Carolina Baptist had given to Furman, 1.6 million a year, was something that was very significant. One of the reasons is that most of that money was what we would call "freed up money." An institution like Furman can get a generous gift of a million dollars, maybe five million dollars, occasionally, but gifts like that are often "designated" type gifts. They don't pay the light bill, they don't pay salaries, they don't take care of the maintenance of the buildings and grounds. But one of the good things about the Baptist money was it was "freed up" money that we could use in the budget in places where there was most need, wherever that happened to be. And so with the severance with the Baptist Convention apparently there was a meaningful loss of revenue and, in a sense, it was more than the 1.6 million because, for the most part, it was "freed up" money. And so to cover this with the good insight of Wayne Weaver instead of using our traditional four and a half percent spending, or so, of endowment moneys we momentarily increased that to, I think, six and a half percent spending of endowment money with the view that then each year we would reduce that half a percent and move back down to our traditional 4.5 percent. Now one of the good things and one of the remarkable things and, to me, one of the great things about this entire story has to do with alumni giving. In the United States there are a large number of colleges and universities, I don't know what the total is but it's a large number, but only twelve or less than twelve have alumni where 50% of them make an annual contribution to the university. Furman had been in the position of about thirty or so percent, I forget the exact number, of how our alumni had been contributing to the university. But following the severance from the Baptist convention some of that action admittedly prompted from a study or a task force from the alumni association, the increase of alumni giving was remarkable, just remarkable.

Dr. Tollison: They understood the need.

Mr. Roberts: They understood the need more than before that, you know, the school needs us now to come through, so that Furman then within three years, maybe within

two years, but I know within three years, came to the position where it was among the select few in the United States where 50% of the alumni contribute annually to the university and I don't know the exact number now but I think it's ranked about number eight in the nation in alumni giving

Dr. Tollison: It's pretty high up there

Mr. Roberts: This is a tribute, well in some ways it's a tribute to the alumni department here at Furman but more so it's a tribute to the alumni at Furman at the way they have come through with their annual giving and of course the way this has all been demonstrated in the major campaign that we just concluded a little over a year ago.

Dr. Tollison: But your personal opinion that Furman's a better place because of the actions that she took in the early '90s?

Mr. Roberts: Yes. As I view it, the severance was regrettable. I think it was more difficult and painful to me than anybody else at Furman and for that matter anybody else in South Carolina as far as I know. However under the circumstances, given the situation that we had, Furman made a decision that needed to be made for the sake of the future of the institution.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. Anything else you'd like to add?

Mr. Roberts: I believe that pretty well does it.

Dr. Tollison: All right, sounds good. Thank you so much for meeting with me.