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End of an era

After 20 years together, trio decides to leave Chaplains Office as one

When it comes to teamwork, you couldn't find a better model than the Office of the Chaplain at Furman.

Since 1983, Chaplain Jim Pitts, Associate Chaplain Vic Greene and their assistant, Shirley Smith, have devoted themselves to the pastoral needs of the Furman community by drawing on each others' strengths and establishing a working atmosphere based on mutual respect and collaboration. Whether dealing with a difficult situation (the separation from the South Carolina Baptist Convention) or the excitement of a dream fulfilled (the construction of the Charles E. Daniel Chapel), they have nurtured and cared for the university and its people.

In the process, they have built highly regarded programs in career guidance and continuing education for students and ministers. They have been diligent in reaching out to both current and former Furman employees and their families, and they have continually challenged the university community to confront complex moral and ethical issues by inviting provocative speakers and hosting special programs on a wide range of topics.

Now, having worked together as a unit for so long, they have decided to leave as one. On July 31, Pitts, Greene and Smith retired from the university that they served for a combined total of 76 years.

"I didn't foresee all of us leaving at the same time," says Pitts, "but perhaps it's appropriate. I think we have worked exceptionally well together in our ministry here at Furman."

Pitts, a member of the Class of 1960, has the longest tenure on campus, having joined the department as associate chaplain to L.D. Johnson in 1967. After Johnson's death, he succeeded him as chaplain in 1982.

He says, "It has been such a privilege to live, learn and work in a place like this. I'll leave with some grief and some relief, but mostly with a genuine affection for Furman and for so many people who will remain dear friends."

As chaplain, Pitts says, one of his most important jobs was to serve as a "living reminder" of the "traditions and history of the mighty acts of God." He points out that both the church and the college are institutions that have historically emphasized the value of remembering and learning from the past.

"We have only a short window of time in which to pass on our traditions and history to the next generation," he says. "The past informs your present and provides a context for anticipating the future. We can't just hit the delete key and wipe it all out, because all of us can benefit from understanding what has gone before.



Highly regarded for their collegiality and good cheer, Vic Greene (left), Jim Pitts and Shirley Smith developed a model program of pastoral care at Furman.

"I hope Furman will continue to encourage its people to remember where we came from and how we got where we are."

Pitts will continue as chair of Smyth & Helwys, a publishing company that specializes in Christian books and educational resources. He and his wife, Nancy, also plan to enjoy more time with their two grandchildren.

And he does get one extra perk from Furman: He will help to lead the winter 2004 study abroad trip to Turkey, Greece and Italy.

Greene, who graduated from Furman in 1973, joined the staff in 1983 as associate chaplain, shortly after Smith came on board as administrative assistant. He and his wife, Janet Jacobs '73, are moving to her hometown of Franklin, N.C., where he anticipates continuing to work in some area of ministry. But first, he says, he'll take time to rest and rejuvenate. "I call it my 20-year sabbatical," he says.

"It is not easy to leave Furman," says Greene, "but I feel a strong sense of peace with this decision. I've had a growing sense that it's time for a change, and I feel that God has been involved in this process."

Greene finds it difficult to name one particular aspect of his Furman work that he enjoyed most, but his enthusiasm picks up a notch when he is asked about his travels with Furman students, either on academic programs or mission trips.

"To be able to relate to individuals so closely on a day-to-day basis and to

share with them the opportunity to learn about other cultures firsthand — those experiences will be hard to duplicate," he says. "We've been to Cuba, to Belize, to places where we met people who are living their faith in bold and sacrificial ways. It is inspiring and humbling not only to have met these individuals, but to have established genuine friendships with many of them. I hope to maintain those contacts."

Both Greene and Pitts will have to adjust to their new challenges without Smith, whose efficiency and organizational skills have kept the chaplains on task for the last 20 years. But they know that, if needed, she'll be there for them — at least, when she's not catching up on her reading and visiting her three grandchildren.

And while the trio may be leaving Furman, they are not leaving the new chaplain, Vaughn CroweTipton (see page 26), in a vacuum. Remaining on the staff are Susan Bennett, chapel receptionist, and sexton Carroll Huff, both of whom exude the sincerity and warmth that has been the hallmark of the entire chaplains' team.

In summarizing the retiring trio's 20 years together, Pitts says simply, "We've concentrated on trying to be generally useful and to putting as high a premium on relationships as on tasks." They have done so with grace, good cheer and a genuine commitment to the idea — and the ideal — of the Furman family.

— Jim Stewart